

This Glowing Ember In My Heart

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This Glowing Ember In My Heart

by [furiheart](#)

Summary

For a school writing project sixteen-year-old Tom writes to thirty-year-old prison inmate Chris, scheduled to be released soon. Change and upheaval and awakenings happen, in all the best and worst ways.

Remix of [this](#) original work.

Notes

I took the text for my original biker fic and used it as a foundation for this new story, which features Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics. You'll see some familiar things, but most of the story has undergone a /major/ facelift. There are lots of new scenes and new characters and new developments. It's over 100k (about 60k more than the original), so I thought going with chapters this time around would be best. I'll add them all within the next few days. I truly hope you all enjoy this version, too.

I cannot thank my beta reader [duskyhuedladysatan](#) ENOUGH. You are the most MOST and ily. Nicki to my Bey.

And a big thank you to Teresa for being my go-to person when I had questions about a/b/o dynamics. She'll say she did nothing, but she was a huge help to me too. Cute Little Bear ;-)

[Tom](#) and [Tom](#) and [Tom](#). [Chris](#) and [Chris](#).

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

"Your electric lips have got me speaking in the tongues
I have prayed for a power like you
To see deep down in my soul
Oh, you make me bloom like a flower, a desert rose"
~Katy Perry, Spritual

Gem-Studded Dragonfly

Tom squirmed and told himself to sit still, even if there was nobody in the room to see him fidget. Over the years it had been harder and harder to ignore that certain part of himself, but the last few months had been especially trying, with the new tingling warmth spreading just within him. Some days it was nearly unbearable, like when he bled and had to stuff himself full of cotton to stopper the flow. Those days he was so sensitive and achy in his belly, squeezing his knees together and biting his lip. Only it seemed worse lately. He didn't remember being this tender in all the times he'd bled since he was thirteen. Scratching at his belly, he wondered if there was a bug going around, something he'd caught drinking from the school water fountains. Curling a leg under his seat, he ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Bending over his keyboard, he tried again.

School had been out for a week and he still had no idea what he would do for the summer project his English teacher, Mrs. Liz, had assigned them. He could hear her voice as the final bell rang and kids rushed to the doors.

"Don't forget your writing project! Reach out into the community, you'll never know what you'll discover!"

Now, clad in only briefs and a loose T-shirt, Tom searched the city's community outreach website, browsing through social gardening volunteer hours, finger painting art projects with the local YMCA summer camp, and Pen-Pal opportunities.

Tom paused at that.

Clicking on the link, he read the information, voicing his disbelief. "Writing to prisoners?"

Based on good behavior and time left on their sentences, some prisoners were allowed to have pen-pals, people in the community who chose to write to them. Prison officials hoped the exchange of letters would encourage the prisoners to maintain their good behavior and avoid any complications in their release into society. Tom had the ability to choose from a list of prisoners who had not yet been contacted. As prisoners were chosen, their names were removed from the list of contacts, making sure that no one got more attention than anyone else. There were no photos posted, only name, age, the amount of time left on the prisoner's sentence, and a small blurb of their hobbies.

Tom, head bent over a closed fist, scrolled through the list of over a hundred prisoners, both men and women, but Tom ignored the women's names entirely. Jimmy, Tino, Marty, Jon, Sam, Sammy, Little Sam, Tom scrolled through them all, more curious about age than anything else. Anyone in their twenties seemed too young to him, and anyone over fifty too old. He continued to the next page and read the first name.

"Chris H.," he read. "Thirty years old. Two months pending. Hobbies: Motorcycles and cars."

Tapping his thumb on the desk, Tom hesitated. He didn't know why he went ahead with it. He was sure Mrs. Liz had something entirely different in mind when she assigned the writing project, but he also liked how unique it would seem to her. Writing to an inmate, cataloguing their letters into a neat portfolio, presenting it to her in the fall as his summer project.

He bit his nails, flakes of his green polish chipping off. He would need to remember to scrub the polish off before Jeff got home.

Tom shrugged. Why not.

He copied down the address where he would send his first letter, and then closed out of the browser. At best, it would boost his grade by a few points. At worst, he'd get some kind of stalker out of it. He really hoped for the former.

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Dear Chris.

Tom paused, wondering if that sounded too intimate. Hey Chris? Hello Chris? He shrugged and continued writing.

Dear Chris, My name is Tom. How are you enjoying prison?

He groaned and sat back, crumpling up the paper. Suddenly, this whole writing project seemed stupid. He really wished he could see what Chris looked like. Was he big? Or skinny? Was his face in a permanent scowl, or did he smile sometimes? Did he have any tattoos or piercings? Any prison wound scars? Were his hands big? Tom sighed. Maybe it would help him better figure out his letters if he could only see a picture of the guy.

Dear Chris. My name is Tom. I thought I'd write to you and see how you are.

How do you think he is? Tom chided himself. He's in prison. Squeezing his legs together, he shifted and put the tip of his pen to paper again.

May 20th

Dear Chris,

My name is Tom. How are you? I'm pretty good. I've been spending my summer vacation out by the tracks, or in my room. Or at the movies. I read a lot. I draw sometimes, too. I could draw you something, if you'd like. What sort of things do you like to do? What do you do to keep busy in prison? I hope this letter finds you well.

Sincerely, Tom.

With a sigh, Tom licked a stamp to the corner edge of the rumpled envelope and throwing on a pair of worn shorts, jumped onto his bike, pedaling to the post office in the center of town. He didn't want his mom—or Jeff, for that matter, the creep—to accidentally see his letter to the prison in their mailbox, so he thrust it into the post office door slot as soon as he bumped over the front steps of the ancient building, bike tires spinning. Taking a slower route, Tom returned home, head bent, one hand stuffed into the pocket of his cargo shorts, hoping the noonday sun hid the blush he felt creeping up his neck.

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The girl's whimpers grew louder the closer Tom came to his mother's room. She was probably on her second shift at the diner by now but her boyfriend, Jeff, was home. Jeff, who liked to stay in most mornings and watch porn after his customary cup of coffee, playing it so loudly Tom could hear it no matter where he hid in the house. Usually it wasn't a bother while Tom was in school, but summer break was going to make being home unbearable. As he slid another foot closer to his own bedroom, a loud resounding smack echoed from behind the closed door, followed by a sharp cry and the girl's voice again.

Oh please, yes, just like that. Punish me. I deserve it.

“She deserves it,” he heard Jeff say through the door. “Hit her harder.”

Stomach twisting, Tom tiptoed the rest of the way and was through his door when the sound suddenly shut off and he heard Jeff’s voice, gruff, hard with demand.

“Tom?”

Keeping so very still, Tom held his breath and slowly eased the door closed, praying it wouldn’t creak. It was only after the girl’s cries started up again that he secured the bolt and breathed a sigh of relief.

He really wished he had his own bathroom. Waking up to piss most mornings was a dangerous game of trying to avoid Jeff, who ever since moving in with Tom’s mother almost a year ago seemed to be getting slightly more aggressive in his advancements toward Tom. Most of it seemed like the usual crap men pulled when they were trying to play stepdad: signing Tom up for baseball and flag football, smacking him around when he failed at both. Hand/eye coordination wasn’t exactly Tom’s specialty. Plus, he’d never truly felt comfortable in a locker room where he couldn’t even change clothes without casting uneasy glances over his shoulder to see who might discover that secret part of himself. He almost always sought refuge in one of the stalls, his own attempts to ignore that part becoming less and less successful. He couldn’t ignore it, no matter his mother’s wishes. There was no way.

Just...just don’t mention it, Tom remembered her telling him around the time he was five or six. *Just ignore it. And don’t tell no one about it. No one can know. Be a good boy now and go play.* Ashamed and confused, Tom had nodded and ran to the backyard, kicking stones against the wall, tears blinding his sight.

Lately, some of the other students weren’t even allowed to participate in athletics at the high school anymore. A mix of mostly boys and a handful of girls designated as blooming alphas, exhibited behavior that was often erratic and borderline violent, aggressive toward other students who had come out as omegas or betas. As per regulation, they were restricted to the upper west corner of the school, attending their classes together away from the others. Tom was fairly confident he would be labeled a beta. No surprise there. He’d never amounted to anything special so far; he was sure he would slink by unnoticed the rest of his time at school and hopefully land a good enough job to support himself away from his indifferent mother and her predatory boyfriend. A beta like himself would be safe, he thought, especially with his dangerous secret. Omegas were the sought after ones, not the runts like him. And then there were the rumors of the Duals, but no one really took those seriously, not when no one he knew had ever seen one, or even heard of one. Tom didn’t really like to think of the Duals too much, or else he might start to wonder things about himself that should maybe be kept in the dark, especially as he really had no one to confide in.

Taking a deep breath now, Tom flopped onto his bed and pulled his laptop close. As he waited for his browser to boot up, a chat box popped up on the screen. It was his friend, Bobby.

<Baubin7 wrote: Tom. Stop looking at porn and come over>

Admittedly, Tom watched porn only during the rare times he was home alone. And it was very specific porn, about daddies and their boys, and all the ways they showed their affection. Often caught rapt, biting at his thumbnail and pawing tentatively at his crotch, Tom could watch for only a short while before his shyness got the better of him and he slammed his computer shut, hairline red. But now wasn’t one of those times, and he sighed as he started typing.

<Tomm6 wrote: im not watching porn. im researching our English project>

<Baubin7 wrote: sure ok. Dude, whoa. School was let out like a week ago>

Tom laughed.

<Tomm6 wrote: I know. Shut up.>

<Baubin7 wrote: hey i just got the new modern warfare. come over. please please>

Tom was about to write that he wouldn't be able to, but then he remembered Jeff down the hall. He might try to come in again like that morning last week. Sometimes he wished he could just spend a day lying half naked in his room without worrying about intruders.

<Tomm6 wrote: ok. be there in 15>

<Baubin7 wrote: wat r u doing for the english project?

He hesitated, biting his lip. He wasn't sure if he wanted to share his idea for the project just yet. But it had been a week since he sent the letter to Chris and had received no reply yet. It was probably time to start thinking of something else.

<Tomm6 wrote: nothing yet. not sure what to do.>

<Baubin7 wrote: same. i was thinking I could write a letter to the White House every week and see how long it takes to get a reply.>

<Tomm6 wrote: dont get accused of terrorism.>

<Baubin7 wrote: shit. didn't think of that. anyway. i'll let you know if I think of anything>

<Tomm6 wrote: k. be there soon>

<Baubin7 wrote: see you>

Changing into some jeans and a short T-shirt, he wondered vaguely if Chris H. had thought his letter was stupid and rejected it into the waste bin and that's why he hadn't received a response. Fighting the anxiety spiking in his brain, he sat back down at his computer and pulled up the Pen-Pal site. As he waited for it to load, he searched in his drawer for his favorite lip gloss, applying some lazily. Rolling his lips together, he searched along the list of inmates but couldn't find Chris's name. Did that mean he had accepted Tom's letter? Not wanting to get his hopes up, Tom closed his laptop and hopped out his window. He got on his bike and pedaled out into the street, hoping Bobby had some soda at least.

They played the video game for most of the day, snacking on chips and soda and leftover pizza from their dinner the night before. The sky was darkening by the time he rode his bike back home, but not before stopping by the mailbox, stomach tumbling nervously. Neither his mom nor Jeff ever checked the mail, always relying on Tom to bring it in and leave it on the table for them to see. He was glad of that now, worrying over what they might have said if he'd received a letter from the prison. He flipped through the envelopes, electric bill, cable bill, a note from the Jehovah's Witnesses that lived down the street—Are your souls saved? Come to our meeting and we'll pray together—until he got to the last one, a white envelope with the prison's emblem in the top left corner. His name and address was scrawled out in a short, choppy hand. Squealing, he stared at the dried ink, smudged slightly on the 'n' of his last name. Heart beating excitedly, he tucked the letter into his back pocket and raced up the driveway, dumping his bike behind the

bushes by the front door. Ignoring his mother's call that dinner was ready, Tom bypassed the kitchen, gripping the mail tightly. Frankly, he was surprised she was home. Probably because Jeff was due back soon.

"Tom?"

His mother stood at the archway into the kitchen, spatula in hand. Tom skidded to a stop and turned to her, breathless. He swallowed, and waved. She had her straight blond hair wrapped in a messy bun, still in her greasy waitress' uniform, and her eyes were bagged with fatigue.

"Dinner's ready. So go wash up if you wanna eat."

"Okay, be right in."

"What came for you?" she asked, skimming through the mail he handed her.

He shrugged. "A sports listing for the park summer league. I might do soccer again." Not likely, Tom thought. Jeff had bullied him into one sport too many, all failures and scabbed knees and blamed losses and once, surprising Tom into complete silence, a punch to the lip. Tom's split lip had healed but Tom, bleeding and bruised and crying in his room, would never forgive how easily his mother had ignored the cut, believing he'd gotten it from some scrap on the street. That had been almost a year before and she never mentioned it again.

His mother nodded absently at his explanation, already turning away.

Tom raced back to his room and locked the door. Slicing through the top of the envelope with the tip of a ballpoint pen, he slid the letter out, extra careful not to tear it. He pulled it close to his face and started to read.

May 24th

Dear Tom,

Nice to meet you. Thanks for the letter. I don't get much mail here. Any, actually. But I have plenty to keep me busy. I have access to the yard for two hours in the morning. I work out there, play basketball with some of the other men. I attend some meetings after midday meal, and can watch tv or whatever before lights out. You said you're on summer break. How old are you? And sure, I'd love a drawing. Are you working on anything right now?

Sincerely, Chris.

Tom read it over twice more, feeling a strange sense of elation settle over him. Chris had actually replied! He had so many questions. What did Chris mean by meetings? What kind? Did he have friends inside with him? Or did he have to fend for himself, never sleeping in peace? He didn't know what 'the yard' meant but Chris made it seem like maybe it was some kind of outdoor gym. So he works out, Tom thought, already imagining arms and thighs bulging with muscles, wrists thick and dusted with hair. Was he an alpha, he wondered meekly, swallowing around a small lump in his throat. Did they keep the alphas and the omegas separated on the inside? How did that all work? Frustrated, he read over the letter again, biting his lip. But should he tell Chris his real age? Sixteen (almost seventeen!) suddenly seemed too young to be corresponding with a thirty-year-old prisoner. What if he spooked Chris away? He spread the letter over his chest, feeling protective of

it, protective of this fledgling correspondence he had with Chris, who seemed very nice and curious about Tom. Heart fluttering, Tom suddenly decided that Chris was *his* secret, one that he wouldn't have to share with anyone except his English teacher, and even then he could brush it off as nothing important, just another project among many.

He blinked over Chris's questions again, giddy with the prospect of telling more about himself to this stranger, that this stranger was interested and would listen and would give Tom his undivided attention. His heartbeat quickened, and he felt a throbbing pulse between his legs, but squeezing his thighs together he forced himself to fold the letter carefully and slide it back into its envelope.

Chris wanted a drawing. Tom sat over his desk, mulling over the idea of what he could send him. A self-portrait? He scrunched his nose, already imagining how stupid his hair and thin lips would look on paper. Maybe a—

"Tom! Dinner!"

His mom's voice, tired and thin, rang loudly down the hall, making him jerk out of his thoughts.

Stashing the letter under his pillow, Tom headed to the kitchen, wondering what color Chris's eyes were and if maybe he would like to see a bit more of the sky.

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Tom hated having dinner when Jeff was home. Jeff, who always sat at the head of the table, glowering at Tom when Tom's mother wasn't looking, or peppering Tom with asinine questions about his schoolwork, as if he really cared. Jeff was some kind of traveling salesman, making Tom wonder why such an occupation even existed anymore. He didn't sell vacuums to high-heel-wearing housewives, but he did sell some kind of antivirus software to small businesses. Over the months, he'd slowly rooted himself into their home, their lives. His mother worked nights at the diner downtown, taking extra shifts whenever she could, but Jeff was the one who brought in most of the money, which is why Tom figured she let him stay so long, put up with his occasional drinking, his angry shouts, his treatment of Tom.

Worn, but shiny black shoes stacked just inside their bedroom door beside her smaller white slippers, Jeff's suit jacket flung over the couch, his coffee mug on the counter, cigarette butts in the ashtray by the TV remote. Signs of Jeff's presence were everywhere, and Tom did his best to escape to his room immediately after arriving back from school. But Jeff sometimes caught him in the hallway. Tom wasn't very tall for sixteen, and so it felt like Jeff loomed over him every time. His skin always smelled of ash and day-old aftershave, sour and a bit bitter. Tom didn't know how his mother got near the man. Tom, afraid and disgusted, would lean away, but Jeff would take his elbow and squeeze it hard.

"You do your homework?" he would always ask.

"Yes," Tom whispered, eyes down. As slowly as he could, he would draw his free hand behind his back, not wanting Jeff to see the glitter polish on his nails.

"And you picked up around the house before your mother gets home?"

"Yes."

"Get to your room. You do as I say. I'm an *alpha*."

Jeff would release him and stare after Tom, who would hurry to his room and lock the door, rubbing his elbow and hoping his skin wouldn't bruise.

Whether or not Jeff really was an alpha, Tom didn't know. His mom, as far as he knew, was a beta, and so if Jeff chose to be with her and not some other omega...what was the point? Wasn't it all about the frenzy and the passion, the undying need to consume and be consumed? It was true that Tom had never witnessed an alpha during a rut, or an omega during a heat, but from what he'd heard none of that happened between Jeff and his mother. And thank goodness for that. What a terrible thing to witness.

Their conversations always turned out the same: Jeff hovering, Tom cowering, some part of his body sore after. He'd hit Tom only a handful of times since that last soccer game eight months before, but Tom could see it in Jeff's eyes, waiting; see it in the way his hands sometimes curled into fists at the dinner table, upset about one thing or another, Tom's surliness or the stubborn curl in his hair—"smooth that shit out, you look like a goddamn girl". Tom would always retreat, a frustrated scowl on his face. Maybe he *liked* looking like a girl, *being a girl*. Maybe he liked staring at how Savannah in Geology put on a fresh coat of mascara before class, batting her lashes into the heart-shaped reflection of her compact mirror, pink lips parted. Maybe he liked the green gem-studded dragonfly clip in her hair, patting his own curls self-consciously, wishing he could ask her if he could try it on.

It was Tom's main priority to stay out of Jeff's way. As it was, his mother seemed too tired to notice anything was amiss, and Jeff was entirely different with her, affectionate and quiet-spoken. Nothing of the hard edges and growled words Tom knew. The fact that she probably wouldn't believe him even if he told her the truth about Jeff hurt him more than the bruised lip and the slaps to the face ever had.

Tom figured he would be rid of Jeff one day. Either Tom's mother finally kicked him to the curb, or Tom's eighteenth birthday would give him the freedom to finally leave. Still, whichever option happened first couldn't arrive fast enough. As a beta, he could come and go as he pleased, with very little danger of being targeted by stronger alphas. It was the waiting that was the worst. He went to his wall calendar and flipped the pages. Just under two years until the right February.

A Line of Inmates

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

His letters with Chris continued, Tom becoming more and more ecstatic with every mail delivery. They were exchanging up to two letters a week, hindered by the slow pace of the daily post. As much as Tom wanted to send Chris a drawing, he always hesitated, convincing himself that it was too ugly, too childish. Surely, his rendition of the park at sunset wasn't something that could in any way compare to what Chris remembered of life outside the prison, right?

But Chris didn't forget. In fact, he frequently asked Tom about the drawing he was supposed to have sent, writing that he was waiting patiently for it, that he already set aside a space on his wall. Tom couldn't help but wonder if he picked up on a bit of teasing in Chris's words, a flirtatious tone that had Tom blushing and grinning like a schoolgirl. But he shut those thoughts down, convinced that Chris was just bored locked away in some cell, that his letters to Tom were just blips in his day where he didn't have to focus on the danger of his surroundings. And Tom often wondered about that danger, what threatened Chris on a daily basis. Did he get into fights a lot? Did he have to follow a certain set of unspoken rules among the prisoners that existed completely separate from the rules invoked by the prison system itself? How exhausting that must be, Tom thought, reaching low and palming himself lazily, absentmindedly. He had enough trouble just keeping up with high school, where the rules were spelled out clearly. Then again, the student body was in and of itself a type of caste system and maybe high school and prison weren't all that dissimilar in that regard. Still, Tom wasn't about to mention this observation in one of his letters to Chris, whom he figured probably wouldn't appreciate the comparison. Slipping his hand lower, he let his fingers glide over the lush heat hidden just beneath his sac, his flesh trembling at the rare touch. Biting back a moan, Tom snatched his hand back and bent over his desk, determined to finish his letter and mail it to Chris. But before he dropped it in the mail slot, he did a quick look about and then rubbed the sealed envelope along his neck, liking the thought that maybe some tiny part of himself would reach Chris with his words.

June 6th

Dear Tom. I have to admit, your letters have been a bit of a pick me up. Some of the stupid shit that happens in here feels like I'm back in high school—Tom squealed because he knew it—but your letters make me smile. They remind me of what I have to look forward to on the outside. The bike crew that I ride with, some of them come see me in here, but most of them keep away. When one of us is locked up, it's always best to keep your head down. Don't want to bring any more attention to the crew than necessary. And I understand that. Still, I get lonely. But I haven't felt like that since we started writing. So thank you. P.S. I'm still waiting for my drawing. Or maybe a picture instead?

Sincerely, Chris

Tom sat numb. A picture? He glanced around his room. At the neat stacks of books against the wall, the small twin bed, the desk with his secondhand laptop. On the dresser he kept his hair brush and body lotion. But in the drawer by his bed, he kept his few bottles of nail polish—green, dark purple, and hot pink—as well as a nearly empty tube of lip gloss and the yet unopened package of mascara he'd shoplifted from the drug store at the corner of 6th and Euclid. He remembered running straight home and breathing into a paper bag for a full ten minutes, sweat spilling down his back, thinking the police would break down his door any minute. But nothing happened and he hadn't yet had the courage to try the black mascara on his blond, blond lashes.

He'd told Chris he was twenty-one, hoping the lie was sufficient enough to keep him writing. But Tom wasn't sure he was ready to send a picture yet. One look at his scrawny arms and thin torso, at his wild blond curls and pink cheeks and Chris would know for sure he'd lied about his age. Tom thought he had a copy somewhere of his freshman year picture, looking even more pale and pink-cheeked, the small gap in his front teeth more pronounced than it was now. Tom hoped it would close up entirely soon. On second thought, it was probably best not to send that picture.

He penned another letter, explaining the books he was reading and the things he'd found out by the train tracks, which is where he liked to go when Jeff was home, speeding down the hill on his bike over the gutted ditches. Before he lost the courage, he included the drawing he'd done of the park at sunset, hoping to avoid sending a picture of himself. At least for now.

I love the drawing, Chris had written soon after. The colors look real. But I guess no picture, huh? Are you shy? What do you look like?

Tom sat curled up in the corner of his room, blocked from the door by his bed. He bit his lip at Chris's words, feeling his face flame.

I look like a boy, he wanted to say. I look like a girl. I look like myself. I think I'm really pretty, and strong when I have no one but me which is always. I miss you already and I can't explain why.

Rubbing a hand down his face, Tom thought about what to do. It really seemed like this crime-hardened man in prison was waiting around for a picture of *him*.

He didn't own a cell phone, so he couldn't take a picture that way. Maybe a disposable camera from the drug store would be best, but he was afraid to go back there since he'd stolen the mascara. And then his eyes landed on his laptop, and he slowly rose to his feet. It would be easy. Take a picture, send it to himself, go down to the convenience store and print out a copy on the machine they had in the corner. He probably had a couple of bucks in change strewn around his room. He could afford it.

Suddenly nervous, Tom went to the mirror and tried to fix his hair, pushing it back or flattening it down. But the curls stayed fluffed up and he sighed, falling back on his bed. Maybe another time. For now, he'd draw Chris something else, maybe the pier by the ocean where he had sat during that one school trip he'd taken when he was twelve, feet sunken in the water, schools of fish darting over his toes. Tom would never forget the feel of all that water, so smooth and ice cold, nothing like the desert he lived in. It would only be a year later that his first flood of blood come, a hot slick between his legs, feeling more like home than anything.

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Tom found he couldn't avoid touching himself whenever he sat down to write Chris a letter. Something solid had taken root in his mind about the man, what he might look or feel like, what he smelled like, how he smiled. And with the growing pulses between his legs, not to mention the steady filling of his cock, Tom's letter writing often went interrupted as he grew braver in how he

felt along his moist slit, bringing his fingers up to his mouth to sniff at his scent, something warm and low uncurling in his chest. So hard to ignore now, and so easy to explore, Tom was grateful for the lock on his doorknob, even if it made him feel only a tiny bit safer.

June 10th

Dear Chris,

I'm sorry I haven't been able to send a picture. I guess I am kind of shy. I was looking at my calendar today and noticed you have less than a month! Congratulations! Do you have any plans for when you get out? I'll be back in school by early September. Things here at home aren't too great, so I plan on leaving as soon as I can.

June 15th

Dear Tom,

It's ok. As you can imagine, I don't have many picture opportunities in here either, otherwise I'd send you one. I'm not shy at all. After I get out, I plan on having a much deserved shot of whiskey. But only one. I'm not much of a drinker. And then I'm going to jump on my Harley and ride until the sun comes up. I miss my bike. A buddy of mine owns a mechanic shop and he'll hire me on. There's not much work for an ex-con, but we make do. What's going on at home? Is everything okay?

June 20th

Dear Chris,

I'm ok. My mom's boyfriend isn't the nicest person. She works round the clock it seems and isn't here most of the time. That's why I'm out of the house as often as I can to avoid him. Me and my friend Bobby go to the movies. Or we play video games. I sleep over at his house sometimes. But mostly I just read. The library is open late during the summer. I like to camp out there until closing time, or look for trinkets out by the tracks. I'm sort of uneasy at home, but I'll be alright. I always am.

June 23rd

Dear Tom,

It's visiting day here and most of the others are in holding, waiting their turn to see who came for them. I never get visitors, so I'm in front of the TV. I have it all to myself. I can't tell you how much Fresh Prince I've seen. It gives me a chance to laugh for once. Tom, about your mom's boyfriend. Has he done anything to you? Are you sure you're ok?

June 26th

Dear Chris,

I promise I am. Things get kind of tense sometimes. But I've dealt with it for a long time. He won't hurt me again. Listen, when are visiting hours? I was thinking maybe I can visit you? But only if you want. :)

June 29th

Dear Tom,

You would visit me? That would be great, a nice change of pace. Next visiting day is this Saturday. I just have to add you to my visitor's list. It's not a very long list. And what do you mean by he won't hurt you again?

Tom sat in the waiting area at the prison, surrounded by women holding wailing babies and old grandparents with canes. His leg kept bouncing, no matter how hard he tried to get it to stop. He picked at a nail but not too much. He'd only just painted them that morning and didn't want them to flake. Before Jeff woke up, Tom had changed into clean jeans, his scuffed up black Chuck Taylors, and a grey Rolling Stones shirt. It fit him smaller than before, and he wondered if he'd grown since he last wore it.

Walking to the bus station had taken forty minutes, but he didn't want to leave his bike chained there, already imagining coming back and finding it gone. His bike was his only means of a quick escape, and he wouldn't risk losing it. He hadn't responded to Chris's last letter. He didn't know how to explain the dangerous dynamic that existed between him and Jeff, and how if he told his mother, Tom had the nagging suspicion she wouldn't believe him. In any case, Tom didn't feel comfortable putting on paper what Jeff had done to him; it made it too final, too real, when often Tom could make himself believe it had all been a bad dream. Very soon he would be rid of Jeff and the worry that came with him.

Chris had added him to his visitor's list, noting that visiting hours started at eight in the morning and ended at two in the afternoon. Arriving at seven meant Tom got through the screening and security checks faster, but had to wait an arduous forty minutes before he could see Chris. He crossed his arms, foot bouncing again. After two months of writing letters he would finally see him, finally be able to put a face to that choppy handwriting.

“Hiddleston!”

Tom startled and sat up, thinking—absurdly—that it was Jeff yelling for him. But an officer stood at the metal doorway, clipboard in hand, looking around at the assembled visitors. Tom jumped to his feet and headed to him. The officer matched the name tag stuck on Tom’s shirt to the list before him.

He gave Tom a quick glance over. “You marked yourself as a beta?”

Tom nodded, adjusting his badge. “Yes.”

The officer said nothing and Tom shifted on his feet, nervous. Lamely, he said, “I never went through the change.”

Something softened in the officer’s eyes. “You don’t have to explain, kid. You ever been here before?”

“No.”

“Okay, look. Alphas and omegas are kept separate from each other, for obvious reasons.” Tom nodded, listening rapt. “Betas, like you and me, we aren’t any kind of special, so we’re mixed in. Since the inmate you’re visiting is a registered alpha, he has to be kept isolated from the rest of the people in the visiting room. Especially when they’re in a rut, Jesus,” the officer said quietly, shuffling papers in front of him. “Not that he is right now, because there’s no way we’d let him visit with anyone if he were, but when they are it’s intense. Seems to get worse when they’re in close proximity to omegas. Which is why alphas are bunked with alphas. Leads to plenty of fights, but at least nothing...” He winced. “Sexual. In my opinion, they should be kept in completely separate prisons, but whatever. Overpopulation. Any questions?”

Tom shook his head, pale.

“Don’t worry, kid. We have armed guards with tranqs posted on the inside. Follow me.”

He was led through a stark white hallway and into a large room filled with metal tables bolted to the floor. There were people sitting at the tables, but no prisoners in sight. The officer ushered him to the first of a line of clear-walled rooms. He was told to have a seat and to wait until his inmate was brought out.

His inmate.

Tom nodded and swallowed past his sudden bout of dry mouth. Glancing around, he saw that the room was empty save for a table big enough for two people to sit facing each other. Through the glass wall facing the main visiting area, he counted approximately twenty tables, all differently sized to accommodate more than one visitor and all filling rapidly. Spread among them were more crying toddlers, quietly whispering families and even one member of the clergy. In every corner of the room, officers watched silently. Across the way was a wall lined by a long pane of clear glass, into which Tom could see was another bright hallway, empty for the moment. On the wall to the left were huge plastic placards with rules for visitors: Touching was permitted during the start and end of the visiting hour. Hugs, handshakes, and kisses were fine, but nothing unsavory. Everything had to be in good taste, whatever that meant. Probably no making out. And then there were the placards about behavior between members of the different groups, and punishments for inappropriate conduct, and what one should do in case of an emergency. Tom didn’t want to know what any of that meant.

The entire place gave off a cold, calculated vibe, every action performed with a precision that set Tom's teeth on edge. Every move, every breath was observed, recorded, analyzed, and he found himself sitting frozen, eyes dancing over the general hubbub before facing the inside of his meeting room, the seat opposite him still empty.

He fidgeted, his eyes drawn again and again to the far window into the empty hallway, somehow knowing that was where the prisoners would be brought in. A minute went by before his suspicions were confirmed. A line of inmates filed in, all wearing wilted orange jumpsuits with white undershirts. Tom sat up in his seat, craning his neck to better see the progression.

A murmuring started up in the room, family members trying to glimpse their loved ones, waving excitedly. The officers along the wall straightened, eyes sharp on the room at large. A loud buzz sounded and then the door to the bright hallway opened. Out came one prisoner at a time. White, black, brown, the men looked entirely different and completely the same, all with guarded, hunched shoulders, cautious eyes, slightly shuffled steps. They weren't cuffed, but all kept their hands crossed in front of them, out of habit or regulation, Tom didn't know. Some of them were led to rooms like the one Tom sat in, and others were allowed to disperse among the larger room, finding and greeting their families. It was quickly apparent that the only prisoner left behind had to be Chris, and the sight of him made Tom's heart flutter. He was tall, very tall, with blond hair falling to his wide shoulders and brows pulled low over his eyes, eyes that finally landed on Tom. Chris hesitated, and then glanced around, finally taking the first step and moving through the tables toward him. An officer stood at the door and gestured for Chris to enter.

Tom's heart rate spiked, sitting up as Chris neared him, eyes wide on his face, so much more handsome than Tom could have ever imagined. Peeking out of the collar of his orange jumpsuit, Tom spied two long spikes of a tattoo, curving in from behind his neck to stop just beneath the hinges of his jaw. The rest was hidden beneath his clothes. In fact, both of Chris's arms were tattooed, long sleeves that ended at his wrists, skulls and swirling smoke and the long cold steel of blades. And then Chris was standing before him, Tom craning his neck to see him up close, finally.

"Oh," he managed, blinking fast.

Chris's eyes, narrowed in a small show of confusion, were blue with thick dark lashes framing them like the lazy span of palm leaves. His full lips were pulled into a frown, accenting the long scar on his right brow. Tom desperately wanted to touch it, to ask the story behind it, but they only stared at each other for a full minute, Tom's mouth parting slightly.

Chris finally broke eye contact, glancing at Tom's name tag.

"You're not twenty one," Chris said.

"Sit down, inmate. Or be escorted back to your cell." The officer at the door had a hand on his baton, addressing Chris.

Jaw clenched, Chris nodded and sank into the seat opposite Tom. The lull in the main outer room was quieted in their private cubicle of glass, and Tom felt entirely on display.

"You're not twenty-one," Chris repeated, much softer.

Tom shrugged. "How do you know?" He was so beautiful. How could he be so beautiful?

A soft chuckle "Because you're not."

"How old do I look?"

Chris narrowed his eyes. "Fourteen."

Tom tried to subdue his blush, and failed. "I'm not fourteen."

Eyebrows raised, Chris waited.

"I'm sixteen."

Chris rubbed a hand over his face. "Shit."

Tom felt a twinge of panic in his gut. "But I won't be for long. I turn seventeen soon."

"*How* soon?"

A mumble. "February."

Chris crossed his arms. "I had a feeling you were younger. Talking about your stepdad sniffing around you. Staying over at your friend's house. Summer vacation."

"He's not my stepdad," Tom whispered, spreading his hand on the table, watching the heat of his skin condense on the cold metal. Chris's voice was so deep, slightly raspy at the ends of his words. Was it from disuse? Chris flicked his gaze at Tom's green fingernails, and then back to him. Tom felt a pulse between his legs, and he squeezed his thighs together.

Across from him, Chris's nostrils flared.

"So," he said, leaning forward. "Jeff. You wanna talk about it?"

Tom shrugged. "Not really. What's your tattoo?" he said, touching his own neck.

Chris studied him, no doubt noting the quick change of topic. "It's a design. I'd have to take my shirt off for you to see the whole picture." He smiled when Tom's cheeks burned red, his teeth white and healthy, surprisingly enough. He glanced down at Tom's flat chest, his lean belly, and back up at his face. "Is that why you didn't want to send a picture? Because you knew I'd be able to tell right away?"

Tom wouldn't look at him, feeling foolish all of a sudden. The man across from him was a stranger, no matter their letters. And he realized that Chris, with his nice face and strong limbs, wouldn't find anything attractive about Tom. What had he been thinking? Plus, he was an alpha, a fact Chris had neglected to mention. Did it really matter, though, for a beta like Tom?

He shifted in his seat, leaning on his elbows, ready to bolt.

"I'm glad you're here," Chris said suddenly, and Tom looked up. "I'm glad that I can picture your face now when you write. It's...nice. To be able to picture you." And to Tom's great amazement, Chris was the one to blush, laughing quietly and looking down.

"You're not mad at me?" Tom whispered.

Chris's face softened, his brows smoothing out. His hand, on the tabletop, twitched. Their fingers were only inches apart. "No, Tom. I'm not mad at you."

Tom breathed out slowly, nerves dissipating. They smiled at each other, Tom's foot nudging Chris's under the metal table.

Chris went still, eyes drifting closed at the contact. Nostrils flaring again, his hand fisted, looking

huge next to Tom's smaller one, tanned and calloused, with big veins snaking into the inked skin of his arm. Tom licked his lips, and sat forward, captivated by the effort it took for Chris to control the emotion in his face. Was this an effect of being an alpha? Or was it because of...him?

Finally, those blue eyes settled on Tom and he was taken aback by the confusion in them.

"I wasn't expecting this," Chris said quietly, keeping his foot pressed to Tom's.

"Me either," Tom admitted, rubbing his arms. They kept it so cold in that room.

They said nothing for a few moments, and then Chris shook his head. "What are you doing writing to a guy like me?"

"I didn't know you were going to be this hot." It was an unmindful blurt, and Tom sagged in his seat, shoulders hunched, a little embarrassed.

Chris eyed him for a long moment, and then huffed, face pink. He said nothing.

Tom shifted. "Would you prefer that I stopped?"

Something in Chris's face hardened, a tightening around his mouth that showed Tom just how averse he was to the idea. "No."

Tom smiled and looked down, pressing his elbows together. "Okay, then."

Chris pointed at Tom's arms. "Do you do that on purpose?"

Confused, Tom looked down. "Do what?"

"Squirm around like that?"

Ignoring his burning face, Tom met his eyes. "No. I just...I don't know. It's not consciously done."

"Hmm."

"Why?" He didn't mean to sound so breathless, but Tom's heart was pounding in his throat and he was having trouble looking away from the man before him. "Do you like it?"

Chris blinked, a blunt fingernail scratching at the surface of the table. He cleared his throat. "A little. Yeah." Tom was pleased to see that Chris's own leg began bouncing underneath the table.

Emboldened, Tom sat propped on the edge of his seat. "You know, I've thought about you a lot. About what you might look like." Chris's eyes snapped up to his, and he listened, sitting so still in his chair. Tom swallowed and continued. "What you might sound like. I had no idea...I mean, when you walked in here..."

He shut up, elbows rubbing again.

"Did you know I was an alpha?"

"No."

"And did I disappoint you?" Voice soft, Chris continued to pick at the table, the scratch of his nail on the metal doing nothing to distract Tom from his closed-off face, as if braced for Tom's rejection.

“No.”

Chris’s eyes darted up to his, and then he smiled, slow and wide, stealing Tom’s breath. Tom let out a nervous giggle and prattled on. “I mean. I wondered what you might think of me and I’ve enjoyed our letters so much. They’ve been such a great distraction from things at home. And summer is so boring. I’ve ridden around all over the city, but I have to be careful by myself. Kids like to beat on other kids, especially if you’re alone and they want your bike.” He smiled tightly, easing back into silence, more familiar to him than anything. “Like I said in my letters. I read a lot, and spend loads of time at the library. But I’m mostly on my own. It’s kind of lonely.”

Chris listened to every word. And then he took a deep breath. “Honestly, Tom. I didn’t know what to expect. I knew you were a kid. There was something really innocent about your letters, but I couldn’t get myself to stop writing to you. I thought about you a lot too. And well... I’m not disappointed either.”

Tom laughed, nervous. He had a bundle of butterflies in his stomach and he suddenly didn’t know what to do with himself. He laughed again, feeling his cheeks warm.

“But I’ll be bad for you,” Chris added seriously. The words were hollow, regretful, and he didn’t meet Tom’s eyes.

Tom nudged his foot again. “I don’t think you will be.”

Chris shook his head. “Look at you. You’re like a kitten. You don’t think with one touch, my grimy paws won’t dirty you up?”

Tom shrugged. “I’ve thought a lot about that too. The touching.”

Chris inhaled sharply. “I’m an alpha, Tom.”

It was different from how Jeff said it. That snarl wasn’t there, the upper-handed demand for respect, all forced authority shoved at him. Chris was assured. He wasn’t trying to prove anything by saying it. It was just a softly stated fact, a truth. Tom really liked that.

“And I’m a beta. So what?”

Leaning forward, that long arm braced on the table, Chris sat stunned, face frozen in clear disbelief. His nostrils flared again lightly, eyes dragging down Tom’s form.

“Who told you you were a beta?”

“No one did. I’m almost seventeen and haven’t gone through any change. Heats hit at thirteen, fourteen the latest.” *Right around when I got my first period.* “But I’m past all that. And there’s no way I’m an alpha.”

The muscles in Chris’s jaw jumped and he looked away, breathing in another small inhale. “Fuck.” Looking determined, he faced Tom again. “Look kid, I’m almost twenty years older than you—.”

“Fourteen, actually,” Tom interrupted, but ducked down at the glare Chris threw at him.

“—and I’m about to be released. You don’t want to be getting mixed up with a criminal like me.”

Tom wasn’t deterred. “I don’t care about the age. I actually really like that you’re older. Chris, you had to have felt it earlier. Why can’t we explore this?” Mind racing, Tom really had no idea what would be waiting for him at the other end of this visiting hour, but now that he’d seen Chris, heard

him, spoken with him, it became cemented in his mind. This was something he wanted to try. No matter his secret body part, or his monthly bleedings. He wasn't going to let what had confused him before stop him from trying to know Chris in this way. "My mom works all the time, and Jeff is an alpha and summer is hard for me to be home. I mean, our letters—."

"Jeff is an alpha?"

Tom blinked. "Yes."

Chris looked off to the side, deep in thought.

Tom inched forward, trying to catch his eye. "Chris—."

"It's not safe for you here."

Feeling the hot creep of shame on his neck, Tom suddenly felt very small in that big, cold room. Like Chris was this great flame and Tom only a fluttering moth, floating around him, desperate to be near the light, no matter how devastating it would be to be consumed. Trying not to let how upset he was show, Tom blinked around the room. Not safe? "And so what if I look like a kitten. You want me to change? I can start working out, bulk up so I can protect myself? Drink protein—."

"Don't you dare," Chris said softly, voice low in warning, playful almost. Tom stared at him, waiting. "You look...fine...*nice*...just the way you are. Don't change anything." His jaw clenched as he looked away.

Tom smiled and cast his eyes down, hearing Chris's quiet intake of breath. Tom filed that away as something he knew Chris liked. Feeding off of Chris's tension, he thought of something quick to say. "So, um. Can I ask why you're in here?"

The scowl returned to Chris's face.

"I got slammed with aggravated assault and battery."

"What's that?"

"I beat someone up so bad they had to be hospitalized for a while."

Tom ducked his head. "Oh."

Chris smirked. "A guy named Tony. He was an idiot. One of our bike crew gone rogue. Made the mistake of handling a crew job on his own. The leader of our group, Mick, sent me after him."

"So you just...did what this guy told you to do?"

"Yes. You make a mistake, you get what's coming to you."

Tom shifted, not exactly seeing the sense in what Chris said.

"Besides," Chris added. "I get the feeling you know what it is to obey."

"Fifteen minutes!" The officer by the exit announced.

Chris glared at the man before flicking his gaze back to Tom who, having jumped at the loud announcement, was blushing scarlet.

"Only if I really like the guy," Tom admitted softly, drawing his eyes from the officer back to

Chris. "I don't obey just anyone."

Voice gruff, Chris said, "Sounds very omega of you."

Tom frowned. What?

And in the light filtering in through the high windows, Chris soaked him in, committing him to memory, the lightly freckled arms, the golden curls, those big blue eyes, all the blushing. He didn't expect the kid to be so slender, so innocent. He eyed his long neck, knowing how easy the skin would be to bruise, to suck on and mark. It was currently clear of any signs of claiming, and Chris wondered if the boy really knew what he was.

Beta, my ass.

Still, there was something he couldn't quite figure about Tom. Something about his scent that was off from what he sniffed along the letters kept secret back in his bunk. He smelled distinctly male, but there was an undercurrent of something lush and – moist even, something bitterly floral, pungent and soaked, smelling of broken petals and river smoke – that set Chris on edge. He wanted to know what it was.

He imagined the rest of him was just as pale, just as sweet and delicate. Even now he glimpsed a sliver of skin above Tom's hip where his shirt had ridden up. Chris's hands would look so big and tan on that body, and he swallowed past the rise of lust in his veins. He couldn't think about that now. He couldn't let the other guys know how much this scrawny kid affected him, and having only just met him, no less. Besides, he hadn't had a rut since his second year in this place, his ability to control his urges sharpening in the wake of his incarceration. Betas and omegas were kept separate from the alphas, but this boy here, well, he'd snuck in undetected somehow and Chris was beginning to wonder if he could have him for himself, if any of the other alphas in the place could smell him as Chris could.

Tom licked his lips, drawing Chris's eyes there. He cleared his throat and glanced around the room again.

"Are we going to keep writing?" There was a shy uncertainty in Tom's words that made Chris soften, made him want to gather him up in his lap and stroke his hair, block him from view of all the other grungy men in orange, men he knew would have no problem bruising this flower in all the most terrible, wrong ways.

He sat quietly for a moment. "Tom, your letters... There have been a few times I could have fucked up. I could have fought someone or done something that I know would have extended my time. But I kept thinking of your letters. Of you." *You and your scent.* "And so I chose not to fuck up. I'm out of here in a couple of weeks. Plus I really like reading about you, and what you do during your days. So yeah. I think we should keep writing. If you want to."

Tom grinned. "Yes. I want to."

"You're really...eager, aren't you? About a lot of things?"

Tom nodded. "I guess so."

Chris smiled softly. "I like that."

And when the hour was up, they rose and stood before each other, Chris's height, his entire bulk, alarming and exciting to Tom. He started to reach his arms out when Chris suddenly stuck out a hand. Slightly hurt, Tom took it. Chris's whole hand swallowed Tom's, their palms sliding

together, fingers gripped tightly.

“You’re not safe here,” Chris repeated, very softly. He tapped the name tag on Tom’s shirt. “And this? This isn’t right.”

Tom blinked down at where Chris’s long finger poked at him, and then back up at the man’s face.

“But you’ll keep me safe?” Such wide blue eyes, lashes curled like a girl’s.

Pulse quickening in the hollow of his throat, Chris squeezed his hand. “Yes.”

Tom grinned, that flush glowing on his cheeks again.

“Will I see you again?” Chris asked. *Even though I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t.*

“Yes,” Tom said.

“Next week?”

“Next week.”

As the officer began rounding up the prisoners, Chris’s hold on his hand tightened. “Are you going to be okay with Jeff?”

Tom’s mouth opened and closed. He honestly wasn’t sure. Every day was like walking in an unmarked mine field. One of these days he was going to step wrong and something would blow up in his face.

“I have to be,” he said quietly, and judging by the way Chris’s lips curled in a silent grimace, Tom knew his answer wasn’t good enough. Chris, who hadn’t existed in Tom’s world only two months before, would suddenly become his fiercest protector. At least that’s how Tom liked to think of it. He could be entirely wrong about everything. He usually was.

The officer approached them. “Let’s go, inmate.” He took Chris’s shoulder and spun him, herding him toward the back hallway, his hand yanked out of Tom’s.

“Be careful,” Chris said softly, letting the officer herd him toward the door.

Tom stared after him, watching as Chris was pushed into line, blending in with the other inmates, cries of farewell rising from the family members left behind. Chris kept his gaze on Tom, face hardening after a minute, brows drawing low. And then he turned away, leaving Tom in the wake of his heated glare, features cold and closed off, ready for whatever hardships prison life offered in the bowels of wherever that hallway led them.

Feeling bereft, Tom sank back down into the chair as the room emptied around him, wondering however vaguely, what kind of situation he’d stumbled onto.

The bus ride home felt strange and disorienting and stale, his skin too tight, the air pressing in on all sides. Deep in his belly, he started to feel an ache and he hoped he wasn’t coming down with something. Feeling stickier than usual between his legs, he took a deep breath to settle himself and tucked the hand Chris had shaken against his chest, curling into the window, willing the week to pass quickly.

Desire Shot Straight

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

“Where the hell were you?”

Walking through the front door, Tom flinched as soon as he heard that voice. Jeff stood in the middle of the living room, a can of beer in hand. His mother was, like always, nowhere around.

"Your mother was worried sick when she woke up and you weren't in your room. She had to leave for work like that. Who the hell do you think you are, just wandering off?"

Tom kept his hand on the doorknob, his mind already on his bike thrown just outside. His mother never worried about him, never checked on him before she went to work. It must have been Jeff who checked, Jeff who was angry that Tom wasn't where he was supposed to be.

“I was out with Bobby,” he mumbled, but Jeff sneered.

“Oh, really? Because Bobby came by looking for you.” Tom’s face must have shown his surprise, because Jeff bobbed his head, happy to have caught Tom in a lie. “Yeah. Only a few hours ago. Said to let you know he came by. Such a good friend.” His slow steps brought him closer to Tom, who backed up against the open door, ready to flee. He should have by now. There was no way he would make it around Jeff and to his room. And once there, what?

Jeff stopped a few feet away. “But you’re not a good friend, are you? You don’t let your friends know where you’ve gone. You sneak off like the little shit I know you are. You’re a little shit... aren’t you?”

Counting his breaths, Tom held still a moment and then turned on his heel, halfway over the threshold, his bike just out of reach. A hand grabbed him by the back of the shirt. He was hauled backwards and thrown into the wall. Jeff slammed the door shut, his beer can spilled on the floor.

Heart in his throat, Tom watched him, tears already gathering in his eyes. He had to crane his head to see him, and it was nothing like when he had to look up at Chris. He much preferred that hawk-like gaze, so warm with promise, to this alcohol-laden scorn.

Jeff took him by the shoulders and squeezed hard. "My beer's spilled. See what I mean about being a little shit?"

"Please," Tom murmured, angling his face away, skin crawling. "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

This wasn't the same, this was nothing like those videos he loved to watch online, where the daddies came home and spanked their little boys, playfully, gently, and even when they were a bit rougher, Tom could tell the difference between a lead up to amazing sex and the pure cruelty this was. Jeff disgusted him. His touch was hard and terrible, and Tom couldn't stand being near him. A creeping fear lit over his skin, crawling with anxiety and disgust. Whenever he found himself a proper daddy, he knew he would want to always please him, want to touch and serve him. Be a good boy for him.

But not Jeff. Never Jeff.

"Sorry, my ass," Jeff growled. "You spilled my beer!" He lifted his arm and Tom had only a second to brace himself before Jeff backhanded him, the sharp ridges of his knuckles stinging Tom's cheek with the blow. He cried out and would have fallen to the floor were it not for Jeff's hands clenched in his shirt, yanking him upright and slamming him back again. And then his eyes narrowed.

"What the fuck is this?"

His breath reeked of beer. Tom squeezed his eyes closed, trying not to breathe.

"Is this *nail polish*?"

Tom's eyes sprang open. Jeff was glaring at Tom's hand, the same one Chris had shaken not two hours before.

"So you are a little fag. I fucking knew it. Flitting around here like a goddamn fairy. Is that where you were today? Letting some other cock sucker fuck you in the ass? Gotten your heat yet, faggot?"

"I'm a beta!" Tom screamed, sobbing. He struggled to get out of his grip. "And I—I was j-just out!"

"Out. Yeah, you're out now. To me."

Tom's eyes widened as Jeff's hand drifted to his own belt, unbuckling it, pulling it loose.

"I'll show you fucking in the ass."

Tom started kicking, trying to wiggle out from between Jeff and the wall. "No! Please!" He'd never threatened him with rape before. And Tom had never—he couldn't let him *do* it. He would see, he would *see*—.

Already he felt his cheek swelling, throbbing painfully with every frantic beat of Tom's heart. And with Jeff's anger-fueled abuse, he would no doubt leave Tom with serious damage.

Trying to quiet him, make him docile, Jeff lifted his hand and smacked him again, same cheek, same force. Ears ringing, spots danced before Tom's eyes and his arms went limp. But outside, a car door slammed and they froze. Tom's mother was finally home. Jeff released him and Tom slumped to the floor.

"Get out of my sight," Jeff whispered, already turning away. Tom crawled to his feet, running down the hall and to his room. He locked the door and ran to the mirror, hiccupping quietly. His cheek was bruising badly, but the swelling could have been worse. As it was, Tom was immensely relieved that Jeff, too blinded by Tom's insolence and nail polish, hadn't spotted the prison name tag still stuck on his shirt. He peeled it off carefully, folding it into a tiny square so that only his name could be seen above the words "Beta Visitor for Inmate #667596 Hemsworth, C." He would save it with all of Chris's letters.

With his mother home, Tom knew Jeff wouldn't dare touch him again. He would walk with her into the kitchen, ask her about her day. And after a quick dinner, Jeff would take her into their bedroom and do all sorts of unimaginable things to her. Was it that good? Tom wondered. Was it worth keeping him around? How he must reek. And the kisses...Tom shuddered. How terrible.

Tom couldn't believe Jeff had actually been about to...but would he have? Would he really have

thrown Tom down on the floor and forced himself in? What would he have done upon seeing what really lay between his legs? Fresh tears burst over his eyes, trying not to imagine it. He hoped he never had to find out. Curling up gently on his bed, careful with his cheek, he reached under the mattress for the stack of letters he kept saved there. He wiped at his tears and then sniffed along the edges of the envelopes, imagining Chris's scent there. But why imagine his scent when he could imagine *Chris*, that big warm body, making Tom feel safe and protected. Hugging his pillow, Tom slowly calmed down, weeping into its soft cushion, noiseless. He didn't think Chris would ever hurt him. He wouldn't hit him like Jeff did. And if Tom needed a bit of discipline, Chris would do it the right away, smacking his bottom and not his face, or punching his stomach, or kicking his back. No. Chris wouldn't do that. Tom knew he wouldn't.

"Daddy," he mumbled into his pillow, already half asleep, cheek aching, half remembering the way the sunlight had filtered in through the windows in the prison visiting room, casting Chris's hair golden, like long stalks of wheat.

**

Dear Tom,

I thought of you when I woke up this morning. The light slants in from the high windows in my cell. The windows are tiny and horizontal, and so fucking annoying. They aren't big enough to see out of, but I like to imagine what might be out there. I imagined you. Riding your bike out by the tracks, your hair fluffing in the wind, your cheeks pink from the heat. I imagined you smiling, because I can tell that comes easy to you. Bouncing over the tracks, guiding your bike down into the dirt, glass and broken bits of plastic popping under the tires. I wondered if you were okay, wherever you were. That you were safe. That no one was trying to come onto you that you didn't want. That you were happy. What makes you happy, Tom? Tell me about what you do, what books you're reading, what music you listen to. Tell me your favorite color and why. Tell me what you think of when you wake up and if you go to sleep scared. Tell me everything, please. ~Chris

Dear Chris,

Your letter made me cry a bit. I loved it so much! Where do I begin! I'm picturing your cell, and how small it is for one so large, so beautiful. Like trapping the sun in a glass jar. I love going to the tracks. It's usually abandoned, with no one around. Sometimes I'll hear kids coming closer and I'll take off. But usually it's just me. I'm reading a few books right now. A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. The Dovekeepers by Alice Hoffman. The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver. My room is piled with books. I'd love to show them to you one day. Oh, Chris. A lot makes me happy. A lot makes me scared. It's not always that I go to bed scared. Jeff is a threat to me. I can feel it. He doesn't like me and seems convinced of my guilt of something every time I see him. It doesn't matter. Summer is the worst time of the year because I'm not kept busy with school. It's all library and bike time for me. My favorite color is purple! Purple and pink. And green. I guess I can't choose. Green because I love the spotted green dots of the saguaros on the mountains. Pink because most nail polish colors are some variation of pink and I love them all. And purple because sometimes when I open my window at night for fresh air, the sky is the color of a dark plum. And when I wake up I hope I can still see some of the stars, but it's never true. I can't wait to see you again, Chris. Will it be okay if I imagine you holding me tonight? That scares me sometimes too. Being so alone in the dark. But if you're with me, I won't be that afraid. ~ Tom

Dear Tom, Yes. I'm holding you. I am. I'll never let anyone hurt you again. I promise. ~Chris

**

“What happened to your face?”

Waiting at the table for Chris and the other prisoners to be escorted in, Tom had touched around his cheek, the skin noticeably less swollen, but still tender and tainted purple. He hadn't been able to nab some concealer from his mom's room, and as soon as Chris sat before him, his wide smile faded as he'd zeroed in on the bruise. Tom looked down, hand lifting on its own, blocking his cheek from view.

“Nothing,” he mumbled. “I'm okay.”

Chris leaned forward, anger narrowing his eyes. “Like hell you're okay. Did he do that?”

Tom kept his eyes down, and said nothing.

“Answer me.”

Tom flinched and then nodded.

“When?”

“Just after I got back from seeing you last week.”

Chris's eyes closed. “Goddammit.” His hands curled into huge fists.

Tom sat up, reaching across the table, but he drew back at the last minute. Chris watched this movement, eyes flicking nervously around the room. Instead, he nudged Tom's foot. They pressed their shoes together and Tom felt the wire wrapped tight inside his ribs loosen a bit.

“I'm okay, Chris,” he whispered, fingers twisting together. His eyes misted, and he blinked to clear them. “I've been avoiding him. And once school starts, it'll be better. I can stay after class. There are some programs I can attend. Drama and arts and crafts and stuff.” He shrugged. “Sometimes he's too drunk by the time I get home. And I'm light on my feet. I can make it down the hall without him knowing.”

Chris glowered. “I don't like it. I don't like that he has access to you.” Something drew his eye over Tom's shoulder, and he frowned slightly.

Scanning over his shoulder, Tom saw nothing but families talking in the outer room. He turned back. “I don't either.”

“Why does he do it? Is that all he does? Is hit you? Has he—.” He paused, sitting back heavily, as if something had just dawned on him. “Has he tried something more?”

Shifting in his seat, Tom remembered the clink of Jeff's belt buckle as he tore it open, holding Tom roughly to the wall. He closed his eyes, willing the image to go away, and that was all he had to do for Chris to know the truth.

His fists, clenched and shaking, were pressed to the tabletop, and his eyes, when Tom looked at him, were narrowed and livid. Desire shot straight down Tom's spine, and he squirmed in his seat, hands stuffed between his knees. In the shaft of light from the window, Tom could see the bristles of Chris's stubble, gold with a few tiny spikes of grey.

“Has he bitten you?”

Numbly, Tom shook his head. Chris's face collapsed in open relief, sighing down into his hands.

"He's never tried biting me," Tom admitted quietly. "He's just tried...I mean—he's never actually...you know."

Still Chris said nothing. He glanced again behind Tom, a big hand widening on the tabletop.

"Chris," he whispered, and Chris blinked, focusing on him. Tom smiled, trying to draw him out of his dark mood. "Look at me. You're almost out of here. Please don't do anything to compromise your release. That was the point of our letters, right? I mean...you're not going to make me wait longer, are you?" He rubbed Chris's shoe with the toe of his Converse. "Please?"

Chris bent his head and took a deep breath, rubbing his face roughly. "Fuck, Tom. I'm counting every goddamn minute." He leaned his head on his hand. "No, baby. I'm not going to make you wait any longer."

Tom's heart skipped a beat at the nickname, his stomach bunching up with butterflies. A rush of emotion lit like a flame in his chest and he suddenly didn't know what to do with himself. He grinned, cheeks red, the bruise appearing darker because of it, and because he couldn't help himself, Tom reached across the table and touched Chris's wrist. His fingers looked so thin and pale compared to Chris's and he wondered, quickly, what they would look like tangled together on a bed.

Chris eyed his hand and then, surprising Tom, shifted his big palm over it, squeezing once. His skin was so warm Tom almost moaned, managing to swallow it back at the last second. A burning heat crept up his neck, mouth drying after a hard gulp, ears popping in the cold air of that room closing in around him.

A twinge settled low in Tom's belly and he cupped a palm there, wincing. His bellyaches had subsided over the past week, but he still felt tender under his ribs, sweat dotting his face. It was too early for his period. What could it be? Blinking fast, he cleared his throat, nausea subsiding. Chris's eyes looked entirely black when Tom looked back up, and he faltered a moment, fingers clutching at Chris's.

"You look pale," Chris started, shifting an inch closer, but then his eyes flicked behind Tom again. They widened in alarm.

"What's—?" Tom began, turning his head. Chris suddenly launched to his feet and yanked Tom up by his arm. He hauled him to the corner of the room and pressed him flat to the wall, taking up a wide stance before him. All at once, there were sharp, shouted commands, the officers' voices hard-edged with threat, echoing off the sterile walls. People rose up in the main room, their shocked faces turned toward Tom and Chris's cubicle.

Rushing toward them was a man, another inmate in orange, face contorted in a twisted sneer. On his tiptoes, Tom peeked over Chris's shoulder, gasping in alarm. The man struggled past the first officer, and kept running. Arms bracketed to hold Tom in the corner, Chris growled from deep in his chest, the vibrations stuttering through Tom's fingers clenched in Chris's jump suit. Squeezing his eyes closed, Tom braced for impact, but it never came. With a silent snarl, Chris took a step closer to the charging man and threw a solid punch to his jaw. The man flipped in the air and landed violently on his back. But he rose with a hiss and threw himself at Chris.

Frozen in the corner, Tom watched with wide eyes as Chris roared and kned the man right in the sternum, grabbing him up by the back of his collar and tossing him bodily across the small cubicle. The man collided with the glass, cracking it into splinters, before crumpling in a heap on the floor,

motionless.

Breathing heavy, fingers clawed, shoulders hunched, Chris backed Tom up against the corner again, eyes narrowed on the dozen guns pointed right at him.

“Oh god,” Tom whispered, acting on instinct. He put his arms around Chris’s waist from behind, pressing his face to a hard shoulder blade. Chris was pulsating with rage.

“Don’t move!” an officer shouted, and Chris turned a snarled growl in his direction. His body, in front of Tom’s, was tight as a bow, ready to spring.

“Arms up, prisoner!”

Two officers put their guns away and knelt by the downed inmate, checking his pulse. They nodded and called for a gurney. Out in the main room, everyone stood with their chins up, trying to see into the cubicle.

“Chris,” Tom whispered, but Chris only stepped even further back, squishing Tom breathless.

“This is your last warning, Hemsworth. Put your hands up!”

But Chris seemed too far gone. Eyes eclipsed by wide pupils, he stood braced before Tom, head whipping from side to side, identifying the most immediate threat. When Chris didn’t move, the first officer fired his gun, and Tom screamed. Instead of a bullet, a dart whizzed through the air and stuck fast in Chris’s chest. Chris grunted and stared down at the needle. With a grimace, he yanked it out.

“Jesus,” the officer whispered, just as another dart was loosed, catching Chris in the neck. He jerked at the sting, but yanked it out like the first. Tottering on his feet, he scrambled back in angry panic, blinking fast to clear his swimming vision. They mustn’t touch the boy. No one would.

“Again!”

A third dart embedded just an inch down on his neck and this one finally managed to work. Clinging to him, Tom felt when Chris started to tip sideways, eyes rolling up in his head, but he held on tightly, dragged to the floor from Chris’s heavy weight. They collapsed in a tangled mound, Tom scrambling to his knees, cupping Chris’s face.

“Chris! Oh my god, Chris, please! Wake up!”

“Stand back!” An officer took him by the shoulder and hauled him off Chris, who was unresponsive, eyelids quivering.

“Is he okay? What did you do to him?!”

“Stand back, kid.”

He stumbled off to the side, heart in his throat. Two lines of blood trickled from the dart wounds on Chris’s neck, but he was surrounded by officers almost immediately and Tom lost track of him. Another officer guided him out of the cubicle with a strong grip on his arm as Tom twisted his neck to catch sight of Chris. But the room was clustered with people in dark uniforms and he couldn’t see a thing.

“Are you hurt?” someone asked him and Tom blinked. He was in a quiet office with a woman looking at him from the next seat. She had chocolate colored eyes and blond hair smoothed back in

a tight bun. Tom immediately noticed the gun at her waist.

“Where is he?”

“The inmate you were visiting has been subdued with a tranquilizer—.”

“Tranquilizers,” Tom stressed, palms sweating. He could still feel on him the great heated imprint of Chris’s body.

“He’s a big man,” she conceded. “It’s not unusual to use more than one tranq for someone with elevated strength. Plus the adrenaline burns through the immediate reaction quickly.”

Tom stood abruptly. “I want to leave.”

“Are you his mate?”

He blanched. “What?”

“He was protecting you as one would a mate. We’ve seen it before.”

“I’m...I’m just his friend.”

She glanced down at his name tag. “Beta,” she said quietly, and Tom rolled his eyes with a groan. Why was the beta thing being brought up again and again? It made no sense.

“I have to go,” he said, patting his pockets as if he had something important there to locate.

“I’ll escort you out. Do you need water or anything? We wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“I’m fine,” he mumbled, pushing through the door and out into a blinding white hallway. Somewhere in this giant facility, Chris was being carted away on a gurney most likely, unconscious after protecting Tom from that man who had obviously been charging toward them. Why had the man attacked? Had Chris sensed that he would? All those glances over Tom’s shoulder. He had to have known.

The officer walked him into the parking lot.

“Need a ride anywhere?”

“No. But thanks. I’m taking the bus.”

She nodded. “Be careful out there, Tom.”

He caught the small warning in her voice, her gaze landing on his name tag again, at what it said there.

“I will. Thanks,” he whispered, before hurrying off down the street.

Keep Your Door Sealed Tight

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

When Tom returned the next week, he was told by the check-in officer that Chris was being held in quarantine.

“But why?” Tom asked, his anxiety spiking. “He’s not in any kind of trouble, is he?”

The man shrugged. “His altercation with the prisoner last week seemed to have put him into a premature rut.”

“Rut?”

The officer blinked up at him, distracted. He tossed a file to a passing officer and continued on with his work. “Yeah, a rut. You know. They go into some kind of heightened state of being.” He shrugged, like it was out of his league. Another beta, Tom figured.

“Will this extend his sentence?” he asked meekly.

“I don’t believe so. Superintendent told us it was un-meditated. Provoked by the other inmate. All instinctual. Stuff he can’t control. He’s just been kept apart from the others for a while, just until he calms down.”

“Oh.” Tom picked at his nail polish. “Okay. Thanks. I’ll try next week.” He turned to go, but the man’s voice called him back.

“Hey, kid. Just a suggestion, but maybe you shouldn’t visit again. The guy is almost done serving his time, and it seems your presence aggravated him.”

“Aggravated him?”

“Made his instincts all haywire.”

“Can I still write to him?”

The cop nodded and tossed his form into a basket behind him. “Sure.”

Feeling even more unmoored on the bus ride home, Tom sat hunched over his belly, trying to calm the queasiness bubbling low in his gut. He wiped at the sweat on his forehead and wished he could have seen Chris, if only for a small moment, to last him through this final week without him. He hoped Chris was safe. He wanted, most of all, his touch.

**

He wrote a letter right away, riddled with questions about if Chris was alright, if he was being treated well. About what had happened. But he received a letter in the mail three days later, which meant Chris had written to him first. The handwriting was choppy and stilted, the ink pressed deep.

Chris might have been trembling when he wrote it.

With tears in his eyes, Tom read.

Tom, I'm so sorry. Are you okay? Were you hurt? I couldn't fight it. I tried to stop it taking me. But I couldn't. I'm sorry I couldn't see you go. Or that you had to go through that at all. I don't know why Williams came at you like that. Or maybe I do know and I'm starting to see that you really have no idea. Someone so innocent and trusting as you. A kitten. It hurts to do this, but I'm begging you not to come see me again. It's too dangerous. I always knew it wasn't safe for you here, because there's something about you that made my instinct to protect flare up. That same thing is what wakes in other men the yearning to claim. And it's this fire in us, okay? It burns and it drives us crazy. Do you understand? But I can't let them do that. Because I see now that I can't let any other man have you now that I've seen you, smelled you, felt you even for a short bit. I can't even trust myself again in your presence. I don't know what I'd do. Take you right there on the floor of that disgusting visiting room. You're so beautiful. Have I told you that? You are. I'm telling you right now, Tom, with all these miles and all this concrete and steel and barbed wire between us, that I fully intend on claiming you once I'm free. I'm telling you this right now. I'll wait for your next letter to read your answer. If no, then TELL ME. I won't bother you again. But if yes, then TELL ME. Because I'll seek you out first thing. I'm only just waking from my first rut in five years. And let me tell you, Tom, being locked in a six by six cell with no one but yourself and your furious emotions and desires, it's fucking hell. I could only think of you. I have one more week in this place. I'll be good, Tom. I promise. You be good, too. Don't let that creep Jeff touch you. Stay away from him. Once I'm out, I'll handle his distance from you, okay? I'll take care of you. I'll take care of everything. Stay as you are. Don't change on me. And speaking of change, have you been feeling ill, Tom? Sick in any way? Would you be honest with me and tell me if you were? If you are, please, baby. Keep your door sealed tight and your window closed. Plug towels in all the cracks, and stay safe. Please. I'll see you soon, babe. Don't let anyone bite you. ~Chris

A hot tear slid down Tom's cheek, and he sobbed quietly into his palm, Chris's words blurring before him. He was coming for him. He was okay and unhurt – albeit a little shaken – but he was coming for him. Wiping at his face, he sniffed a giddy laugh and hurried to his desk. Clumsily, in purple gel ink, he wrote a quick letter.

Chris. My knight. My hero. You saved me! I'm okay I promise! Please, Chris. I'll wait for you here. Please come for me. I want this. I want you. Nothing can keep me from you. As soon as you're out, I'll be ready. I'll be waiting. It's true that I've been feeling a bit ill lately, but it feels like a bout with the flu or something. A bug that will pass. I'll be better by the time you're free. I'll wait for you. I promise. No one's bitten me. No one will. Come soon. P.S. What is a rut, exactly? ~Tom

He sealed the envelope and rode his bike to the post office. His pulses were stronger between his legs, his limbs feeling hotter and heavier than before. He pressed his knees together for relief, and sighed in near defeat. Feeling moist and deliciously, deliriously achy, he tossed the letter into the outgoing mail and then rode his bike to the tracks, tears falling freely now, laughter bubbling up from that well deep in his chest where he kept his most precious secrets.

**

Baby, a rut is when an alpha goes through something like an omega's heat. We want to fuck and fight everything. I got all of the fighting out of my system when I was younger. I still get the urge to pick fights but it isn't as hard to ignore. I do want to fuck though. And a lot. My ruts last two days. Before, when I was younger, I wouldn't bite while I fucked. I never mated. To do both at the same time would be to claim an omega and the bond would be for life. I've never felt that desire, until now. Until you. Do you understand what that means? ~Chris

Chris, I do understand. And I want you too. I want you, more than anything, to do both, to me. When you're out, I want you to claim me, because if there is anyone I want to belong to, it's you. Will you come for me soon? ~Tom

**

Nights were becoming difficult. Jeff and his porn watching were happening more and more frequently, especially as his mother had taken two more shifts at the diner. Tom kept to his room as often as he could, doing as Chris asked and stuffing the cracks beneath the door and along the window ledge with towels. It helped to keep the sex noises out, and whatever the matter was with him in. But he could lay in bed, sweating and faint, staring up at the ceiling fan whirring the hot air in lazy circles, for only so long before he grew restless and snuck out onto his bike. Veering through the streets, shirt sweat-stained and hanging loose on him, Tom rode until he was breathless, legs burning. He wallowed in the hazy shade of the big oaks at the park, picking at the clusters of daisies and twining their sticky stems into bracelets he wore home.

Chris's last letter had come six days ago and Tom's paranoia was starting to win. Even though Chris had told him to have an overnight bag ready, time spent alone away from him often meant fears took stubborn root, bubbling over him like the wing-beats of a bird. Sunlight lacing his thin frame, he was sure that Chris had forgotten him. He'd been released and had moved on with his life, Tom's suffering and waiting not meaning a thing. Wiping at his tears, Tom would lie there on the grass for as long as he could, until the long stares of strange men finally drove him to his bike. Their gazes followed his exit onto the street, like pinpoints of fire on the back of his skull.

But thoughts of Chris, even the worrying, unfounded ones, helped stifle the terror he felt living with Jeff. It seemed his rage at Tom had tripled of late. And the only reason Tom could think of was that the nail polish had tipped him over from general dislike to full on hatred. Tom had always been so careful with hiding what Jeff called 'faggoty things'. His lip gloss, his nail polish. That sample strip of perfume he'd swiped at the mall, rubbing it on his neck at night. He had one pair of lace panties, having paid for it in quarters at the dollar store. He loved them so much, a tiny pale purple thing that hugged his hips so gently and snug, but he only wore those at night, too, afraid Jeff would take one look at him and be able to see them, and his secret part, through his jeans. As it was, they were beginning to wear thin and he would need to buy a new pair soon. His periods he kept marked carefully on his calendar, secretly, with purple glitter stars. To stock up on tampons, he snuck into the girls' bathroom at school and broke into the rickety dispenser, grabbing a sweaty handful before fleeing. But sometimes he needed to steal some from his mother's bathroom cabinet, hoping she wouldn't notice that the box was missing a few, praying that Jeff wouldn't be lurking in the hallway when he slipped out with his smuggled contraband. And if the risk was too great, he had to go without. And those were the worst days, when the worry kept his pulse accelerated, when he had to slink along the walls for fear of being made fun of.

For now, Tom crept about his own house, sweating and short of breath, always slinking around corners, peering into the ashtrays for any fresh cigarette butts, keeping track of where Jeff was in the house in order to circle around him. But there were a few instances when Tom had been unable to escape Jeff. The first time had been for dinner when Tom's mother was home, Jeff glaring at him over her head. And the second had been after he overheard Jeff arguing quietly about Tom with his mom, saying, "Doesn't it worry you how tightly he wears his clothes? The nail polish? And the glitter? It isn't right, Susie. He needs discipline." And his mother, her voice tired, moving around their bedroom, probably taking off her shoes after a long day at the diner, had simply replied, "Just leave it alone, Jeff. The boy is simply experimenting. All the kids do. It's how they express themselves. He'll straighten out in time." Her paltry excuse for why they both knew he did

that stuff.

Tom thought he had managed to slip away before Jeff stormed out of the room, but he must have caught Tom dashing out the back door because the next thing Tom knew Jeff had a handful of his hair and was slamming him against the brick wall outside, a hand clamped over Tom's mouth. Tom's heart rate tripled, ears ringing in panic.

"Sneaking around, are you?"

Tom pushed back and tried crying out, but it was something quiet and muffled, and Jeff smiled, small and hideous. His stomach in knots, cold sweat sprouted over Tom's skin, that queasy feeling back.

"Quit your struggling." He pressed himself to Tom, who tried sinking away, wishing he could disappear into the wall. "Has anyone fucked you in the ass lately? Maybe you need a good spanking, huh? That'll teach you not to eavesdrop. You listen to me now, and be a good boy. I'm an alpha, Tom. You listen to *me*." Jeff's eyes fastened to Tom's neck and he licked his lips. Chris's warning about bites tripped warning bells in Tom's mind and he started his struggle anew.

Breathing hard through his nose, bile rising, Tom widened his mouth and bit down on the thick meat of Jeff's palm.

"Fuck!" Jeff growled and released him. Tom lifted his leg and stomped down on Jeff's foot. Ducking under his arm, he sprinted for the low wall lining their small property, panting weakly, body throbbing with fever.

"Come back here, you little shit!"

Heart in his throat, Tom scaled the wall and launched himself over the top, landing hard on the other side. Feet skidding, he scraped his hands and knees on the broken glass and rocks of the dirty alleyway behind their house. Vision shifting, disoriented, he stumbled as he ran again, turning back to see Jeff watching him over the top of the wall, face unnervingly calm and cold with threatening promise. Sprinting harder, Tom rounded the corner and collapsed gasping against the wall of their neighbor's house, dragging air in. When his stomach clenched, he bent double and vomited, the vile taste of Jeff's hand, like the dry scratch of dust, still lingering on his tongue. After the alleyway, he made his way to the park bathroom, balling up a wad of wet paper towels and sealing himself in one of the two stalls to dab at his bloody skin, knocking loose the bits of gravel that had dug in deep. It wasn't until well after midnight that he had the courage to return home, climbing in gingerly through his bedroom window, palms and knees stinging.

Showering as quietly as he could, shivering under the needle-like water, Tom slipped back into his room and locked the door, stuffing a chair under the knob for good measure. Moving mechanically, Tom folded a couple of pairs of jeans and some T-shirts into a backpack, adding clean underwear, socks, and his favorite pair of Chuck Taylors. In the front pocket he put his bottle of pink nail polish, in case he needed to touch up his toes. Under his sheets, Tom hugged his pillow and thought of Chris, who would come for him soon, he hoped.

Chills started low along his limbs, making him shake and moan quietly into the pillow. Heat broke open over his skin and he rolled onto his back, seeking cool air.

Chills and heat. Chills and heat. He didn't feel well.

"Please," he mumbled, blinking heavily, fisting the sheets loosely, no strength in his touch. Imagining that big hand cupping the top of his head, Tom fell into a deep sleep, feeling safe for the

first time in months. Still he trembled, and still he sweated, unknowing.

**

And then the very next night, with Jeff and his mother watching soaps in the living room, Tom was lying in bed again, moaning and writhing weakly. He'd been at the park again most of the afternoon but the lingering stares of some of the men on the football field made him roll to his stomach and push weakly to his feet. And if a few of them went so far as to jog out onto the street after his fleeing form, Tom didn't know. He pedaled and gasped for air, sweat dripping into his eyes, the sun beating down on his head.

The flu had taken a turn for the worse, no matter his efforts to avoid it. He downed glass after glass of water, tipped back cough and flu medicine, showered with cold water and pressed cold cloths to his neck, but nothing worked. And now he was trapped in his room again, his body aching like an exposed nerve, raw and sparking.

Blearily, he heard his mother outside his barred door earlier. She spoke quietly so as not to disturb Jeff, asking if he wanted dinner, a little annoyed that she had to come find him.

"I'm fine, mom. No thanks," he'd called out, trying for normal. "I'll just rest a bit. Going to Bobby's tomorrow."

He had absolutely no plans to visit his friend, but maybe if they thought he was out of the house, they would leave him alone. He just wanted to sleep, and touch himself.

Working on its own, his hand inched down his belly, jumping with stilted breaths, panting hollowly into his stuffy room. Under the waistband of his pajama bottoms, his fingers trembled and sought. Tugging at his cock, cupping his balls, further low he searched until he felt that tender slit, damp and slicked with his juices. He sank the first finger in and arched, mouth parting in a strangled moan. He worked and pumped until he managed three fingers up his cunt, wrist aching. He was aiming for a fourth when across the room, wood scratching quietly, his window cracked open an inch from the outside.

He heard it from a distance, barely rousing from his heated doze.

"Please," he mumbled, vision blurry. Between his legs he was sopping, and he had half a mind to worry about the state of his lace undies, pushed to the side for his seeking hand. Legs splayed wide, fingers dripping, he pressed in deeper, choking on a moan. The window scraped up another few inches and Tom turned his head slowly, arms twitching. A shadow rose up behind the pane of glass, and he whimpered, a bead of sweat skidding down his nose to drip onto the sheets. The person crawled in quietly and hurried to his bedside. Tom yanked his fingers out and tried rolling away, succeeding in only flopping uselessly onto his side.

"No. No, don't touch me. Don't bite me. Please. I'm waiting—."

The man took his shoulder and tried rolling him back, but Tom swung his arm wildly, his cry lost in the echo of the loud playback of the show in the living room.

"No! Don't touch me—." A wide hand clamped over his mouth and the rest of his words became muffled. He kicked and tried to scream, his mind buzzing with fatigue and mist, eyes rolling.

"It's me! Tom, listen. It's okay. It's okay, Tom. It's me."

Tom went immediately still, a wave of dizziness blinding him in that dark. He'd dreamed of that voice. Tugging on the man's wrist, mouth freed, he sucked in a breath of air. "*Daddy?*"

“It’s me, Tom. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. But I didn’t want your mom and Jeff to hear us.” Chris shuffled closer, lifting a knee on the bed. He sniffed. “Fucking Christ, Tom. You smell so—.” He inhaled deeply, his tall shadow looming over Tom. “—fucking good.” There it was, that growl. Tom rolled his hips, needing.

Leaning forward now, Tom blinked up at him. “T-thought you were one of the other m-men.” His eyelids were so heavy, the heat so deep in his core. Get it out. Get rid of it.

“Other men?”

Tom nodded, ready to fade away. He mumbled. “The men following me.”

“Shit.” Chris glanced about the room, as if the mysterious stalkers might be waiting to be pummeled right there in the dark. He turned his attention back to Tom, who sweated and writhed.

“You’re not well, babe.”

“Just—just the flu,” he stammered, eyes rolling back in the hope to sleep some more.

“Flu, my ass,” Chris muttered.

“Daddy, please.” Arching his back, he felt the heat pooling in his groin and he pressed his legs together, whining softly.

A hand rested warmly in his hair, rough, big and cupping his entire skull. Smoothing his curls. “It’s me. It’s Chris.”

“Chris,” Tom breathed, circling Chris’s wrist with his sweaty, trembling, sticky fingers. “*Daddy*.”

Chris paused, and Tom, in his addled brain wondered vaguely if he’d just fucked everything up. But the tug in his groin was so strong, his body thrumming with a need so much bigger than himself. For over a day now he’d lain in bed shivering with it, wondering if he should tell his mother, if he needed a hospital, if he would die of the thirst. Without reason, without a clue, he endured it, a sinking devastation cuddling low over his frantic heart. His own touch wasn’t enough. He needed more.

And here was Chris, finally.

Tom rolled his head on the mattress, the fever making him hurt, making him ache. He *needed*. “Please, Daddy—.”

“Okay, baby,” Chris said hurriedly. “I’m here now. I’ve got you.” Strong arms slid under both knees and shoulders, and then Tom was being lifted. He cried out softly as the earth spun wildly, but Chris hushed him with sweet kisses on his cheek, soft murmurs in his ear. In the living room, the static burst of forced studio audience laughter echoed against Tom’s sealed door, and Chris half turned with a bent brow, arms tightening on Tom. The risk of discovery was high.

“Jesus, Tom. You would go through your change tonight, babe.”

Tom cuddled closer, voice small. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“No, baby! No.” Chris squeezed him tightly, kissing his cheek. “You’re perfect. You hear me? You’re beautiful and perfect.”

Chris spotted a black backpack at the foot of the bed and snatched it up, hoping it was the

overnight bag he'd asked Tom to prepare. Wearing only cotton pajama bottoms and a loose shirt, smelling of moist rains and boy sweat, Tom was hardly dressed for any kind of escapade out his window, but that's exactly where Chris headed. When he attempted to set Tom on his feet, Tom whined and clung to his neck, mumbling a faint protest.

"For just a second, baby. A quick second. I'm taking you out of here."

Setting him on wobbly legs, Tom's arms wrapped around him like trembling vines, Chris climbed out first and then reached back in for Tom, who sagged willingly into his embrace, letting Chris do the brunt work of hauling him out into the cool night. Their escaping figures seemed cloaked in shadow, all damp cotton and moonlight leather.

Cradling him still, Chris hurried to the street, where a gleaming behemoth of slick metal sat waiting. Tom blinked blearily at it, wondering what it was for.

"Come on, baby. Get on now." He sat Tom astride the back of the motorcycle and then climbed on in front. "Hold tight to me now, okay?"

Quick to cuddle against that broad back, Tom nuzzled his cheek to a shoulder blade and mumbled, "Yes, Daddy." Chris hooked the backpack over his handlebars so that it rested safely between his legs, and then started up the engine. It roared to life, thundering along their quiet street with enough force to rattle the windows of the nearest house. The noise frightened Tom, who clasped Chris closer, closing his eyes and pressing his sweaty face to the center of his long spine.

"It's alright now, baby. I won't let a thing happen to you. Hold on!" Revving the engine, Chris kicked the bike forward and then they were shooting out into that star-dotted darkness, the houses blurring past too fast to count. Nauseous again, Tom squealed and hid his face, fingers clawed into the front of Chris's shirt. Between his legs, his pussy clenched and throbbed, his cock trapped snugly in the lace, half-hard since a day ago. Desperate and whimpering, he rolled his hips against the harder thread of Chris's jeans, stuttering a moan.

The night air felt good on his body, though, and he relaxed in slow increments. He blinked up at the back of Chris's head, thinking sluggishly that his hair was different. Instead of hanging down to his shoulders, Chris's hair was buzzed short on both sides, with long strands slicked back down the middle. It exposed more of his neck, and especially the long thick lines of the tattoo that curved in to his jaw from behind his nape. How he wished he could see that tattoo. He wanted to lick a path around the entire edge of it. He wanted to be inked upon the man's skin himself, never to fade. Twice during the ride he felt himself slip, angling dangerously to the side. But Chris's sudden grip on his wrists woke him up, his shout to be careful flying harshly over the desert wind. Tom mumbled an apology, spoken silently into that warm shirt, and Chris gunned the engine, desperate to have Tom home already.

White Was the Backbone

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

He lived deep in the desert, miles from the nearest dollar store or gas station. His house, the place he'd missed more than anything while locked up, was adobe style. There was one room and two bathrooms, with a living room and a kitchen and a corner cubby dining area. The porch sagged and was in need of a paint job, with flakes of faded blue scattered in the overrun front yard, but it was perfect, and he was grateful his buddy Jake Harper was able to watch it for him while he was away.

Hardly giving it a glance now, especially in the pure dark that reined in these outer lands, Chris guided his bike to the edge of the tiny garden, mostly weeds that crawled and choked one side of the porch. Cutting off the engine left the surrounding land in total silence, no crickets or owl calls in the wake of his roaring motorcycle. Only silence, and Tom's stumbled mumbling. Vowels rounded by exhaustion, Tom sounded so much like a little boy, eyes drooping.

"P-please, Daddy. I need it. I need—please. It's so much. So much. Daddy. I can't...*handle it*—."

"Baby, I'm here. Come with me now. Easy, okay."

Backpack in hand, he took Tom under his armpits. The boy practically clawed himself into a ball at Chris's chest, not exactly weightless but light enough to be made of the stuff of clouds and monsoon mist, his whispering bow-mouth panting at his neck, sticky with sweat and something else, something he'd sniffed on him back at the prison, caught along the girlish cursive of his handwritten letters.

Unlocking his door, he nearly tripped over his own feet when Tom's warm tongue licked into his ear, his sweet moan tickling the curved shell. "*Daddy*."

"Fuck," Chris whispered, hitching Tom higher in his arms and kicking the door shut. Carrying him down the short hallway to the only bedroom, they fell onto the bed, Chris's bulk forcing the air from Tom's lungs. Tom bounced right into Chris's embrace again, moaning in his delirium. Chris's room was dark, the bed sitting low to the ground. A flat screen TV hung from the wall, a small dresser with a lamp just off to the side. A blue blanket was tacked over the window. His room, his private and most familiar space.

Chris flicked the lamp on and golden light cast over them both.

Taking a moment to stare at him, Chris eyed Tom's chest and torso, the flat plane of his belly, his narrow hips and lean limbs. Tom was so beautiful, casting glazed eyes up at him, hands reaching. He hadn't fucked anyone since he was locked up six years ago, and his first glimpse of this boy at the prison, even following the initial whiff of him from their correspondence, had set Chris's imagination spinning with thoughts of a true mating. Tom was obviously an omega, no matter what he thought himself, or what he had been led to believe. He was certainly past the age when a person knew what rank they fell into, but there was something else off about him that might figure into Tom's confusion about his nature. Williams' reaction to Tom at the prison seemed like the instinctual reaction of a young alpha sniffing a recently turned omega. Only, Tom insisted he had

never experienced a heat. Chris believed him, because there was no way one could mistake a heat for anything else. He was surely now witnessing Tom's change with his very own eyes.

He'd been able to smell him from out on the street. The few bodies he'd seen hovering under the corner streetlamp had scattered when Chris came peeling down the road, their sense of a more powerful alpha overcoming their desire to investigate the flowering smell of the boy inside. How much longer would Tom have lasted lying on his bed as he writhed in his first heat? Someone would have surely broken into his room as Chris had, taken him right there on the bed, a hand over his pretty mouth, teeth embedded deep in his neck, claiming him outright.

Chris growled at the thought, in disbelief at the poor – or incredibly lucky – timing of the entire thing.

Only question was: why hadn't Jeff been beating down Tom's door?

Upper lip frothing with sweat, Tom cast glazed eyes up at Chris, who laid him on the bed, taking care with his pale, thin limbs.

"Daddy—."

"I know, baby. I know what you need. Daddy's here." He was tearing his clothing off, trying to soothe Tom with soft words, but his own sight was beginning to edge with red, his need to mate with the boy rising in a great wave of bloodlust. Tom's need seemed to border on insatiable, his slim hips rolling, hard cock tenting his pajama bottoms, a giant wet stain stamped over the front. Even though Chris had just come off a rut didn't mean he couldn't give Tom what he needed. Really, the only difference was that he had more control over his emotions and that he couldn't impregnate outside of a rut. With Tom, that was obviously not a concern.

Clothes scattered, body naked, Chris crawled over Tom, who immediately grabbed on with sticky palms. Whispering to him, Chris inched Tom's yellow shirt over his head, bringing it to his nose for a deep whiff. Pale and thin, his chest jumped with shallow breaths, panting Chris's name. He had very little hair on him, arms and legs lightly dusted, his nipples small and pink and tightened into little nubs.

"I need you—."

"I'm here, baby. I'll give it to you."

Tugging on Tom's pajama bottoms, Chris realized for the first time that he was barefoot, his feet long and white and delicate, toenails painted glitter pink. Yanking off the moist material, Chris stared down at Tom's crotch, bundled in crooked purple lace panties.

"Holy shit," he whispered, the acrid and floral scent of – pussy? – wet cock flaring his nostrils. Brows high, Chris licked his lips and slipped his calloused fingers under the lace, Tom's creamy white skin goose-pimpling in their wake. Tom gasped.

"Yes. Touch me—please!"

"I'm here...right...here..." Chris trailed off the further he inched those purple panties down Tom's trembling thighs, thighs splattered with sticky juices he could now see the origin of.

Tucked like a shy and plump rosy bloom beneath Tom's tight balls was a *vagina*.

The boy was a Dual.

Shock dropped Chris's jaw. There had always been rumors of Duals, spoken about in whispers, awed and a bit skeptical. People with girl and boy parts, who could breed and be bred. Taken possessions by alphas of both genders. Chris had never met one before, had started to think they were a myth, spoken about only to incite jealousy and superiority.

And here was this boy, this lovely boy, on full display to him, proving him wrong.

"Jesus Christ," he moaned, hands trembling on Tom's knees.

He stared at the dripping pussy for a long moment before Tom's whines brought him back round. He could only stare as Tom lifted his legs and slid both hands over his stomach, cupping himself with relish, tugging on his cock as he quickly sank two fingers into his pussy.

"Shit," Chris breathed, watching Tom finger-fuck himself, spine bent off the bed, the wet squelching sounds echoing in the room.

No matter the suspicions and the scents and the late development of Tom's heat, Chris hadn't expected *this*. He hadn't suspected Tom also possessed a vagina under his lovely cock, with its sweet aroma and pungent and copious juices. But he suddenly realized how it all made sense. Tom was a *Dual*, with twin biologies, hybrid natures. His intersexual ability could have possibly slowed the development of his identity as an omega. But it had certainly been taking a turn just as he and Chris met, or maybe Chris's stronger alpha nature had triggered the change to happen in Tom, the heat to flower, the desire to overrule him.

Poor little pup, he thought, trailing a hand down Tom's cheek, letting it rest heavy and snug over his throat, Tom's neck arched in a show of surrender and obedience. Something shuddering with relief and joy unfurled in Chris's chest, possession taking root.

It was with a startled breath that he realized Tom's dangerous worth in the world, how very vulnerable he was. He was beyond precious, beyond beautiful, beyond invaluable. No wonder Williams had attacked so suddenly at the prison, and how other men had been dogging Tom's steps on the outside. They also hadn't been able to tell what was so different about Tom, his scent ripe but slightly off, confusingly enticing, mysterious. And it was this, he realized, letting his fingers trickle a path up the soft folds of Tom's pussy, lips snarling at Tom's immediate gasp, how he widened his legs for Chris. Impatient even in all his delirious haze, Tom stuck a third finger inside himself, a broken moan bubbling up his chest.

Still Chris hesitated. That very moment there were probably other alphas circling Tom's neighborhood, his fading scent drawing them close, sniffing at the air, wondering where he'd gone. Another person would claim him if Chris didn't, some other person that Tom hadn't chosen. It was a damn miracle Tom hadn't been taken by force by now.

And he'd chosen Chris, had made that more than obvious in his last letter. And Chris, well, Chris knew he had to have the boy even before they'd locked eyes that day at the prison, back when he'd sniffed along the edge of his letters and smelled traces of this wonder. Tom's lovely blushes and his gaspy laugh and soft, innocent way of looking at Chris like he was the sun, submissive even in his gazes and smiles, that endearing way he spoke, voice rounded by a depth hinting at a gentle maturity but lilted low by a shyness so sweet, honeysuckle and rosewater.

"More," Tom breathed, fingers working hard. His golden curls were heavy with sweat. "Need more."

Tom was only sixteen. Chris knew this next step would bind them for life. He had never taken a mate for this precise reason. The commitment was forever. It had all been mindless fucking, never

biting, knotting only betas, always. Mostly men. But looking down at Tom now, all blushing smooth skin, red mouth, pink and lush pussy lips, engorged cock, one trembling hand inching up Chris's forearm, eyes glazed with need...Chris knew with every fiber of his being that he never wanted Tom on display like this, so defenseless and breakable, so utterly wrecked, for anyone else ever again.

"I claim you," he whispered, hiking Tom's legs up, bending him in half. Kneeling on the bed, Chris's cock rose red and thick, a throbbing, veiny part of him that matched beats with his heart, jumping forward, eager to be embedded in that snug heat.

Chris's scent on Tom, his mark and knotting of him, would work to keep other alphas away. His possession of him would be visible for all those who had the sight to see, the ones who *needed* to see. The bite and the first knotting would seal their status as Alpha and Omega. And Tom would be his.

Chris had never been more sure of a thing in his entire life.

The fire in his blood was surging faster now, otherwise he would have taken his time with marking Tom good and well. Inner thighs, his slim waist, each bicep and calf, each round, plump buttock, saving his neck for last, the deepest bite, the most noticeable.

Later, he would savor each and every scent of Tom's body, burying his face in that fluttering pussy, taking his cock in mouth, sucking at his sac. But in this moment, Tom needed to be filled, and fast.

"You're mine now," he said, taking Tom's wrist gently and pulling his sticky hand away. He lined his cock to his vaginal entrance, testing the width of the head to the swollen, slick lips, spreading them. Tom flinched and reached up for him, body burning, eyes shining, long fingers clawing at Chris's shoulder to draw him lower. Tom tilted his chin up and with trembling breaths, they kissed for the first time. Both moaned, Tom clumsy in his haste and urgency, in his endearing need. But when Chris thrust in, he broke away with a gutted shout, spine arched, blunt nails digging into the meat of Chris's shoulders.

And then his eyes rolled back and he smiled.

"Yes. *Yes yes*. Daddy, more. More!"

Tom was sopping wet, and with each snap of Chris's hips fluid dribbled around his spearing cock, soaking the sheets.

"So big. You're so big. So full." Tom babbled, grinning up at the ceiling, that long neck exposed, throat bobbing.

"And you're fucking tight," Chris grimaced, pulling back and pushing in again, Tom's pussy lips stretched so wide around him, his inner walls almost working to keep him out. Tom's cock flopped between them, leaking a steady drip, but Tom ignored it for now. Reaching low, he cupped Chris's ass and dug in his nails, spurring Chris on. And Chris, growling and impatient to have him completely, grabbed up Tom's right arm and bit down into the smooth meat of his bicep.

Tom screamed, two fat tears rolling down his temple. His cock erupted between them, a heavy cream that spilled down his waist and pooled beneath him. He shuddered and clawed at Chris, wrapped around him like the vines growing along the side of his house.

"Good boy," Chris murmured, nuzzling his cheek and admiring the bite mark. It wasn't as deep as

he would like, but Tom needed to adjust to this. Hips still pumping, Chris bit the other bicep, sinking his teeth a little further in. Next was his inner thigh, reachable only because of Tom's incredible flexibility, eyeing his neck the entire time.

"More, more, need more," Tom babbled, long arms tossed over Chris's shoulders. He rolled his hips even as his orgasm subsided, eager for the next wave to crash over his heart. And it did, a second orgasm deep in his pussy, throbbing around Chris, inner walls clenched as he wept with relief into the warm room.

By now, he might have flipped Tom onto his belly but he wanted his first knotting and bite to be face to face. And Chris was close, only seconds from coming. Wrapping Tom tightly against him, his slim body shrouded by Chris entirely, Chris fucked into him hard. Cries and gasps rose to the ceiling, soft birds that circled and flapped in the humid, hot air.

Fuck. Fuck. Eyes clenched shut, Chris's groin tightened and his belly contracted as he came, spewing deep into the boy's cunt. His cock gave small little jumps as it emptied out. Swell and ebb, swell and ebb, he groaned hard and kept himself pressed as tightly against Tom as he could, his knot beginning to form thickly.

Tom's eyes flew open, mouth falling slack in a hazy gasp. "Daddy," he breathed, blinking up at Chris. And then his chin lifted, long throat exposed, an instinctual offering to his alpha, and Chris lost every shred of composure he'd managed to keep until that moment.

Dipping his head, he widened his jaw and bit Tom's neck firmly, a rough clamping of teeth. He was ready for when the boy arched, another gutted scream rising, moving as Tom moved, canines breaking skin.

Fully knotted now, he was plugged deep and would be off and on for the next two days. He would come on average every hour or so, pumping shallowly, limited by the width of the plug. His knot would shrink and then reform once he grew hard again, which was always within a span of minutes, climaxing again, again and again. Together they would lie through each of Chris's climaxes, which would often draw new orgasms from Tom once they grew to know each other's bodies best. They could switch positions to alleviate soreness, but Chris wouldn't be able to pull out until his knot shrank. He'd fill Tom again and again, spilling out onto the bed, a sticky puddle to remind them. And then they could rest, for however short a while, and do it all over again until Tom's heat was through.

Growling into the bite, Chris vibrated over Tom, who lay back obediently, so still in the presence of his alpha. Tom's fingers were pulsing at his spine, a soothing rhythm, his legs fallen open weakly to either side of him. He was mumbling softly, lashes fluttering, palms sweaty on Chris's back. Chris released his neck and looked down at the bite. It was deep and already starting to bruise. Over the next day, his teeth marks would scab, the bite more visible, his scent stronger on the boy.

And Tom would be safe, finally.

"Baby," he murmured, holding the side of Tom's head and nuzzling his cheek. He winced, knot pulsing. "Baby, are you okay?" Fastened to him, he felt every stuttered breath, every heartbeat.

Tom roused slowly. Satiated for now, he would lie in a daze until the fever brimmed over again and he would writhe with that desperate need, calling out for Chris. Mated and bonded now, their bodies would recognize in each other what the other needed most, responding and flowering, striving to meet their disastrous and frantically pleasurable end.

Tom blinked, eyes flitting nervously around the room at large. His voice rose with a small tremble.

“Daddy?” He tried closing his legs, but Chris kept a hand on the creamy inside of his knee, holding him open.

“Shh, shh,” Chris whispered, kissing Tom’s jaw and humming to him. “It’s me, baby.”

Tom’s face broke open in relief, a tear sliding down his temple and disappearing into his hair.

“Daddy,” he whispered, turning his head with a creaking groan and bumping their noses together. “You came for me.”

Chris grinned. “Yeah, baby. Daddy’s here. Are you okay?”

“Mmm, yes.” He rolled his hips and flinched, Chris stuck tight in him. “A little sore, Daddy. And tired.” He was lucid, for now.

“It’s not over just yet, Tom. Can you hang with me, babe?”

Blue eyes blinked open, clearing after a moment. “Yes. Yes, I can.” His brows furrowed delicately. “It’ll get a little worse, won’t it? Before it gets better?”

“Yeah. It will. But I’ll be here to help you. I’ll make it better.”

Tom hummed and snuggled closer, both waiting until the rolling urges crashed over them again.

“I was so scared, Chris. Before. I’ve never felt like that – like *this* – ever in my life. The way those men looked at me—.” His breath hitched, face small and scared in the dark.

“They may still look at you like that, Tom,” Chris cut in, desperate to rid him of the spooked look in his eyes. “But they can’t touch you. Not anymore. Because I’ve claimed you. I still am,” he grunted, wincing as his knot pulsed again. “Claiming you. I’ll stay knotted in you for a little while longer and then I’ll go soft. We’ll be able to rest.”

Tom gasped and lifted his head, eyes widening at where he and Chris were connected. He gave a small inner squeeze and Chris groaned, widening his jaw to bite at Tom’s clavicle. Tom dropped his head back and laughed, a small bead of blood from the original bite slipping around his neck.

Tom dragged his thumb through Chris’s stubble. “And then what?”

“And when you get another wave of your heat, I’ll harden and fuck you again, and knot you again, and be stuck in you, holding you tightly, kissing you like you deserve.”

Tom smiled, teeth shining. “Good, Daddy. I want that very much.”

Chris went soft within the hour, and he slipped out of Tom, who groaned at the loss. They lay with their legs twined, palming each other’s faces, staring, giddy that they were together finally.

Cheeks red again, Tom rolled his head, starting to fall under the pull of his heat again. “I’m thirsty,” he whispered, and Chris snapped his head up, glancing about the room.

“I’ll get us water—,” Chris started, making a move to stand, but Tom clutched his arms, fingers clawed around his biceps.

“Is ok,” he slurred, eyes going distant again, another flash of heat reddening his cheeks. “I can...I can wait. Don’t leave me. Please don’t go.”

Chris could see him slipping under the power of his heat, and he took Tom’s face in both hands. “Baby, I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll help you finish this. Get through it.

But let me grab us some water. You need it. I'll be thirty seconds"

Tom whined, eyes panicking at the thought of Chris being gone for even that long. "But I need it. I need you, Daddy."

"I know, baby. I'll take care of you in a minute."

With teeth gritted, he disentangled himself from Tom's slippery grasp and hurried into the kitchen. Tom's cries for him down the hall spurred his blood, making his hands shake as he grabbed four water bottles from the refrigerator. Tom's smile was wide, if a bit faint, when he returned, wrapping himself around Chris, lips opening for his tongue.

"You came back," he moaned, mouthing desperately at Chris's throat.

"Of course, baby. I couldn't abandon you. Ever."

Tom hummed, and flopped back to the mattress, legs falling open with invitation. "Kay, Daddy. I trust you."

"Drink this, baby. Drink." Chris held the water bottle to Tom's mouth, and he gulped it down greedily, drinking another right after.

Brows furrowed, he arched up with a small yelp when Chris sank in, the skin of his chest and neck flushing with color, Chris's bite mark blooming purple. Chris thrust shallowly against him, stimulating them both, until Tom was coming with a cry again and Chris was bursting once more. Legs trembling, Tom lay weakly with a watery grin, eyes rolled up, babbling about his daddy's huge cock and harder and please I've been good and are you free, are you really free, are you mine, Daddy? His light, airy voice echoed in Chris's head, driving his hips into motion, plowing as deep as he could go, his knot erupting again and again. Wet didn't even begin to describe Tom, who rocked beneath him with blurry little moans. The most obscene and delicious sounds lit over the room, loud squelches as more of their joined spend spilled free of their bodies.

Finally his knot shrank again and he softened. Tom's pussy was pink and plumped so prettily. He very gently slipped free of him, Tom wincing and moaning for more.

With the gentlest seeping change, the sun began to rise beyond the blanket-shrouded window, a lengthening creep of grey over the walls and across the ceiling. And when Tom's cheeks flooded with color and his cries turned fraught with need, Chris pumped into the boy, his boy, this beautiful creature that clung to him and held him within, teeth gritted as Tom whispered honeyed filth into his ear, against his jaw, wherever that bow mouth could be pressed.

Legs numb, Tom squirmed and whined beneath Chris, a warm and sweaty bundle of clinging limbs. Very carefully, Chris lifted himself off of Tom, who protested and clutched and scratched at him to stay close. But hushing him gently, Chris bent Tom's leg and crossed it over his body so that Tom was slowly rotated onto his side. He groaned loudly as blood rushed back into his legs, immediately curling his knees up to his chest. Chris lay quickly at his back, spooning him from behind, thrusting again.

The day passed in a haze of crashing orgasms and low murmurings between the two, speaking softly to each other, lips catching in lazy kisses. Chris knotted and shrank, again and again, licking frequently at Tom's bite mark, lapping at the reddened skin, pride surging in his chest at the depth and strength of the claim. No other alpha would be able to get within a foot of Tom without smelling Chris on him. To ignore such a claim from another alpha would mean certain death.

They dozed intermittently, stirring only when Tom woke with a frenzy and Chris grew hard at his voice, knot pulsing with quiet urgency. The heat eclipsed Tom's senses, blighting his reason and stealing his words. Jumbled, he pleaded and begged, and Chris responded. Pulling Tom onto his hands and knees, he rammed in hard, eyes fasted to the long line of Tom's spine. He was so thin, so vulnerable that each bony knob poked out, starting from the nape of his neck to his narrow tailbone, dotted with two adorable dimples just above each plumb cheek of his ass.

They didn't eat, emptying the water bottles and thirsting still. It became apparent that Tom was beginning to fade. He needed more water. In the middle of a knot, and extremely concerned for Tom, Chris rotated him so that he straddled his waist, each long pale leg flopping limply to either side. With a weary groan, Chris wrapped one arm around the back of Tom to hold him steady against his chest and pushed off from the bed with the other. He tottered for a second, balance thrown from Tom's body straddling him. Still plugged tight within Tom's heat, Chris let himself be kissed over every inch of his face by the sleepy boy as he stumbled out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen, bumping into tables and knocking a lamp into a shattered heap on the tile. They barely heard it. Once at the refrigerator he took another water bottle from the fridge and held it to Tom's mouth. Sucking it down hungrily, Tom moaned with every gulp, throat working, water spilling around the corners of his mouth and drenching his thin chest.

"More," he gasped as soon as he was finished, and Chris laughed, planting a loud kiss on Tom's swollen lips.

"My boy knows only one word when he's needy, doesn't he?"

"*More*," Tom whined, rolling his hips and clenching down.

Chris hissed and opened the fridge again. Tom drank down another two bottles before Chris was able to taste any of the water himself. By that time, they held still as his knot shrank for the umpteenth time, and on shaky legs he let them sink to the floor. Collapsed and exhausted, they lay back on the tile, breathing harshly and staring up at the ceiling. Tom laced their fingers together and squeezed softly, eyes fluttering shut to sleep. Another while later, he was shaking Chris awake, two fingers sunk in already, ever impatient to be filled. Growling, Chris climbed to his feet and yanked Tom up by his waist, liking the flex of his muscles and he maneuvered the boy high, taking his hard cock and finding that sweet, sticky entrance. He plunged in, Tom's head snapping back, his shout echoing in the kitchen. Slamming forward against the refrigerator door, he rocked his hips and fucked into Tom, thick creamy juices sluicing down both their legs.

He wished he could offer Tom something to eat, but he didn't have much in his house. He hadn't had time to buy groceries before he was rushing to find Tom before other alphas got any ideas. But Tom seemed entirely uninterested in food, wrapping his arms around Chris's neck, lips seeking yet more. Somehow, Chris maneuvered them back into the bedroom to collapse on the damp sheets, the bright mid-day sun streaking their bodies in flamed stripes through the curtains.

By the time the second day drew to a close, Tom was hardly coherent. Eyes rolled back, he trembled and moaned, voice gone, lashes wet from tears and stifled giggles of exhaustion. Chris had lost count of the number of times they had come. Just as he thought he would lose the last shred of sanity he had left, swimming in the delirium of orgasm and hunger, Chris felt his knot begin to shrink for the last time, triggered by the end of Tom's heat. His body was on the verge of collapse after only short small minutes of rest in between. Belly flat to the bed, Tom's face was buried in his arms, sweat matting his curls down, looking sepia in the orange light of sunset.

"Baby," Chris whispered, brushing back his hair. Tom's brows twitched. "It's over now."

Knot shrunken, Chris pulled out carefully, noting the red tint to Tom's inner thighs, chafed and

smarting. His pussy was a glistening puddle of cream, bubbling still with the endless fount of cum pouring from him. White streaked his chest and the sheets, cock limp and exhausted under his slim body. And because he couldn't help himself, he bent and bit the firm and rounded flesh of Tom's ass. Tom gasped and lifted his head, mouth parted beautifully. Moving further down, Chris bit one thigh, and then the other. He licked a stripe up his spine and bit him on the curve of his torso, just over his ribs. Tom held so still, breaths shallow, eyes heavy-lidded. He was so obedient, so submissive to Chris's desires, it sent a thrill through his blood.

Rolling him over gently, he bit a hearty mark just to the side of Tom's groin, right on the warm meat of his inner thigh, repeating the bite on the opposite side. He pulled back to admire his work, Tom's body slowly reddening with gentle bites that would fade within the hour.

"Come with me, babe. Come on."

He lifted Tom into his arms and carried him into the bathroom. Sitting on the closed toilet, Tom curled sweetly in his arms, Chris opened the tap in the bathtub, letting it fill with warm water. Even now Tom's legs still vibrated with fatigue, and Chris knew he wouldn't be able to walk for a long while. Once filled with steaming water, Chris turned the faucet off and lowered Tom slowly into the tub. He moaned weakly and rolled his head left and right, hands rising to clutch at Chris's biceps.

"Easy now," Chris soothed. Tom jostled with a panicked gasp, finally blinking up at him and relaxing after a moment.

"What day is it?" His voice was so hoarse, completely shot.

Chris shrugged. "Monday, probably."

Tom sighed and let his eyes fall closed.

"Will your mom panic?"

"No. But Jeff is probably wondering where I am."

"We're not going to worry about Jeff anymore, Tom. Wanna know why? Because you're mine now. And he can't do a damn thing about it. So until your mom starts to make a fuss about where you are and who you're with, and from what you've shared with me, she won't any time soon, then Jeff can just go get fucked. Okay?" Tom nodded, throat working in a loud gulp. Chris smiled. "Just relax, baby. Rest back and let me wash you." He lathered the bar of soap and began sweeping it over Tom's body, taking extra care between his legs as Tom blushed scarlet and let his knees fall open weakly, making room for Chris's gentle hands.

As soon as Chris moved the sponge over his hip, Tom reached low and cupped a hand protectively over his pussy. "I'm so sore," he whispered.

"I'm sorry, Tom," Chris said, pausing. "My knots are big."

Tom dropped his gaze to Chris's penis, hanging heavy and flaccid, so long and thick. His cheeks reddened and his eyes widened, seeing it properly for the first time since emerging from his heat. "You're big, too," Tom whispered, licking his lips. "And I'm not sorry. I like that I'm reminded. Because it's about you."

His body was riddled with bruises and bite marks, his neck mottled purple from the claiming. Even still, save for his pussy and the tip of his cock, Tom was pale everywhere. Everywhere except his knees, which were scabbed and bruised. Chris paused. Mind clouded before by the rising lust at

claiming Tom, he hadn't noticed his injured kneecaps.

"Why are these scraped, babe?"

"Huh?" Tom cracked an eye open, still not fully present.

"Your knees. And your palms," Chris said, lifting one of his hands to examine it. "Why are they scraped?"

"Oh," Tom said, gulping. "I...uh..."

A terse moment passed, and then Chris narrowed his eyes. "Tom?"

There was something stern in that voice that Tom secretly loved and dreaded. "Jeff caught me in the backyard, a few days ago. Tried to...force himself on me. But I got away. I jumped the back wall and landed in the alley. Cut myself. I stayed in the park bathroom until midnight and then went home."

The bathroom was cozy and moist, and dark, but not enough that Tom missed the anger blooming over Chris's face, the furrowed brow, the clenched teeth, full lips parted, the slight tightening of his hands on Tom's thighs.

"I—I don't want to talk about it," Tom said quietly, turning away.

But long fingers took his chin and brought it back, blue eyes hooded.

"Okay, baby. We won't talk about it." Chris braced his weight on the rim of the tub, water rivulets veining down his arms, and bent low to kiss him. Slow and full of tongue, lips bruising and burning, the bristles of his beard rubbing Tom's chin. Tom moaned and cupped Chris's cheek, Chris adoring how Tom inhaled sharply, perhaps not really recalling their many kisses during his heat. Perhaps, he would remember this as his first kiss. When they broke apart, Chris's eyes were wide with promise.

"I'm your Daddy now. Your alpha. I'll take care of you. Protect you. Keep you safe. No one will touch you again."

Tears flooded Tom's eyes and he scrunched them tight, some escaping to drip off his jawline.

"Thank you, Daddy." He sobbed quietly and reached up for another embrace.

Chris finished washing him, knees creaking as he shifted to the head of the tub and rubbed shampoo into Tom's hair. With gentle pressure, he massaged into his scalp, scratching lightly with his blunt nails, Tom a purring kitten in his care. He responded well to low murmurs, tending to curl close and wrap himself all the more tightly around Chris, to hear better, to be closer. Chris imagined Tom was used to indifference from his mother and shouts from Jeff. Whispers and caresses had him practically melting.

After he was clean, Chris let Tom lie in his doze for a few minutes while he stripped the bed of the soiled sheets. He arranged regular blankets on top because he had no clean sheets available after being gone for so long. He would need to wash. He would need to do so many things to make his house comfortable for Tom. But that could wait. Right now, he had a very hungry, sleepy teenager on his hands. Returning to the bathroom, he unstopped the drain and Tom made to stand. But he collapsed back with a pained gasp.

"I got you," Chris said, hurrying to grab a towel and return to Tom's side.

"My legs—." He grimaced.

"I know, babe. You'll be sore for a while."

He pulled Tom to his feet, but Tom couldn't put any weight on them, knees buckling almost immediately. Content to carry him again, Chris wrapped the towel around his shivering shoulders and scooped him up, returning to the bed. He placed Tom on the mattress.

"I'll make you anything, babe. What do you want?"

Tom perked up. "Anything?"

Chris scrunched his face in apology. "Well...actually I don't have much yet. Wasn't able to grab groceries before going to get you. But," he said, reaching for Tom and running both hands over his thin waist. "How about pizza?"

"Okay!"

Chris brought out his cell phone and sat at the headboard, Tom cuddling under his arm as he ordered three large pizzas and promised the kid on the phone a \$20 tip if he delivered it so far into the desert.

"Because there's no way I'm leaving your side just now," he said softly once he hung up. Tom tilted his face up to him, eyes scrunched in a pretty smile.

"Is it done?" he asked, hand trailing up Chris's chest. "Am I yours?"

"Yes, babe. It's all done now." Hand in Tom's curls, he caressed him, eyes flitting over him, wondering. "Are you...okay with that? I mean," he hurried on, swallowing past all his uncertainties. "I mean, I know it's...Tom, when I found you, you were in the throes of it. So far in. And your letters said that—."

"Stop," Tom said, sitting up taller, wincing at the tug of discomfort. "Daddy, stop." His eyes widened slightly, fully coherent for the first time since using that word. But Chris's face softened and he cupped his neck. *It's ok.*

Tom sighed quietly. "Daddy, I wrote what I wrote because I meant it. I can't explain to you how relieved I was when I woke up back in my room and found you there and not someone else, one of those strange men or—or Jeff." He ducked his head, pink forming over his cheeks. Chris's idea of how much Tom dreaded Jeff and his dark intentions was tragically incomplete. Tom, he realized, was terrified of the man, and something ugly and soaked in red flared up in Chris's chest at the thought of Tom having to return to that house where he felt so unsafe. It wasn't right, but Chris would try to make it as easy for him as possible. From now on things would be different for Tom.

"I'll take care of Jeff, baby." Tom's eyes flicked up to meet his, turned down at the corners, worried. "There is going to be no doubt, to anyone, about who you belong to, okay? You're mine?" Tom nodded eagerly, leaning closer. "And I'm yours?" Tom grinned and fell against him with a soft giggle.

"All mine, Daddy."

Chris nuzzled his cheek, breath warm on his face, that big hand cupping the back of his skull to hold him close. Tom's eyes lingered on the inked skin of Chris waist, and then he whispered, "Can I see you?"

Chris smiled. “Yeah, babe.”

Chris kissed him once, fast and hard, Tom tracing his stubble—practically a beard—with the trembling tips of his fingers. He stood and Tom curled up more comfortably against the headboard to watch, eyes widening at his long, muscled legs. Their bodies were so remarkably different, Chris brimming with strength, standing so tall and powerful. Tom was still growing, his body pale and lithe, a wisp compared to his alpha, bound in all his muscles, covered in all his ink.

A tattoo of a feather-haloed skull flexed on his right thigh, a lit cigarette dangling from its toothy grin. Both arms were completely covered in sleeve tattoos that went from shoulder to wrist. There were the skulls, smoke, and blades from when Tom had first seen the tattoos at the prison, but shirtless he was granted the full picture. The biggest skull was drawn over Chris’s left arm, wrapped in two thick bands of barbed wire. It wore a feathered headdress and a garland of wilting roses beneath its jaws. His right arm was topped by the pointed peaks of black pine trees, bleeding black into the rest of the sleeve, which featured flying crows, a full-lipped mouth colored red, and tiny little lines, as if the skin were cracking, ready to burst forth from the inside.

“Turn,” Tom whispered, and Chris smiled. He held out both arms and spun slowly.

One side of his waist featured an angel with sword poised, its wings thrust forward to slow its descent. The other side of his waist made Tom gasp. All of the tattoos were done beautifully, but this one was so life-like that it appeared as if Chris’s skin was torn and bleeding, ragged around the edges, and just beneath that were the tiny letters of some ancient kind of paper. Finally, his back was facing Tom. With a wince, he scooted over to the edge of the bed to see it better. He touched his broad shoulders, letting his thumbs trace over the words inked across the top of his spine.

“And Death Trembled,” he whispered, eyes falling lower, where Chris’s entire back was inked black and down the middle, done in remarkable shading of beige and white was the backbone, each vertebrae outlined and jutting to the sides, throwing a macabre sort of shadow into the background.

“Daddy...”

Chris turned and Tom gazed at him, amazed with his daring art, his strong body like a canvas on which he etched what was important to him, what he thought was beautiful. And they were beautiful, so stunning. Chris returned to the bed and tucked Tom under his arm, Tom marveling at the lines on his skin. He rubbed his face over the skull on his left arm, so smooth where he might have expected rough bone and the tease of feathers.

“You’re so beautiful, Daddy,” he said softly, kissing the marked skin. “I used to daydream about what was under here. And it’s better than I expected.” He reached a hand to his own throat, where Chris’s bite was scabbed and bruised, settling in nicely. “I’m tattooed, too.”

Taking Tom’s shoulders, Chris bent and brought their lips together. Tom sagged against him and moaned into their embrace, giggling when Chris wrapped him closer and pinched his bottom.

There was a loud knock on the front door and Chris hurried to throw on some jeans. Wallet in hand, he paid for the pizza and tipped the delivery boy, bringing the boxes and some water bottles into the bedroom. He flicked on the television and they ate lounging back on the bed, devouring slice after slice, watching a documentary on King Henry VIII.

“What a dick,” Chris interjected, tossing his crust back into the box. But Tom grabbed it up and finished it – “You don’t eat the crust? It’s the best part!”

Bellies full, they slept again, curled up around each other on the bed, Tom’s moist slit pressed to

the meat of Chris's thigh. Tom woke to fingers lazing through his hair, Chris blinking slowly down at him.

"Mark your calendar, babe," he said softly. "You'll start to see a pattern to your heats. You'll be able to figure out when you'll get them."

"Like my periods," Tom said softly, and then blushed scarlet. Frozen, he waited for Chris's reaction. Chris blinked twice quickly before planting a firm kiss on Tom's forehead.

"How long have you had them?"

"Since I was thirteen."

"When omegas usually get their first heat."

Tom said nothing. He was more acutely aware than ever of how odd his biology made him, how confusing its functions were, how off kilter he felt because of it. And yet, he felt a more solid semblance of balance because of it, this beautiful thing that had happened between them. He felt centered and seen, Chris's attention on him like warm sunlight. Tom had never felt anything like it before.

"I actually think I should have gotten my period Friday," he said. "But instead, this happened."

Chris stretched back, Tom rolling with him, head on his chest. "I don't know much about how your body works, Tom. I've never met someone who had...both. There's always been the rumors that some omegas, very rare omegas, were like you. Coveted and fought over if the omega wasn't claimed. But I think that you and me will figure this out. I'll mark my ruts, you mark your heats, and your periods, if you still get them, okay?"

"You don't think I will?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe."

Tom sighed. "It'll sure make things easier. I won't have to steal tampons anymore from the girls' bathroom."

Chris lifted his head. "Your mom doesn't buy you those things?"

Tom shrugged. "No. She doesn't know I get periods."

"But she...knows about this, right?"

"Well, yes. But. She told me when I was very little not to tell anyone about it. That I was a boy and that what was between my legs should never be talked about." He shrugged. "So I never told her. I just cried the first time I bled, and every time after that I stole tampons and dealt with it. But sometimes...sometimes I wasn't able to find anything in time and I would just bleed, going through my day at school, heart pounding in my throat, hoping I wasn't staining my jeans or that someone would see. It was humiliating, that fear, that anxiety."

Eyes wide, Chris stared at him for so long that Tom fidgeted and cast his eyes down, face burning.

"Holy fucking shit," he said after a moment. His arms tightened around Tom. "I have a sudden strong dislike for your mom."

Tom smiled sadly. "She's my mom."

“Look, babe. If you ever need anything. And I mean anything. Tampons or more underwear or nail polish, or anything you want. You tell me. Okay? I’ll get those things for you. You don’t need to hide or sneak around stealing shit. You come to me from now on. Yes?”

Tears flooded Tom’s eyes. He nodded gratefully. “Yes. Thank you, Daddy.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Tom. Jesus.” He pulled him in for a tight hug. “You’re so special. So lovely. I’ll take care of you. I will.” They were quiet for a minute. “Babe? When your mom told you all that about being a boy...how did you feel about that? Growing up with this secret part of yourself, having a boy name and all that?”

Tom thought for a long while. “Most of the time I consider myself a boy. I like my name. It’s mine. I answer to Tom, and I know I always will. I don’t want to change that. But other times, when I’m alone and playing with myself, I feel like a princess who lives in a castle, a little girl just waiting to be rescued. I like pretty things. I like to paint my nails and wear cute underwear. If I was braver, maybe I’d finally try on that mascara I stole from the drugstore. Honestly, sometimes I feel like a boy, and sometimes I feel like a girl. I feel bigger than myself, in my heart. Bigger than anyone else. My chest is flat. I have a penis. I have a vagina, I get periods. But it’s what I feel inside, and it shifts around, depending on my mood and how I feel. It always comes down to how I feel. I guess what I’m saying is that...you can call me your little boy or your little girl and I will love both because I feel truly deep down, that I am both.”

Blue eyes zeroed in on him, Chris watched as Tom quieted and lowered his lashes, no doubt wondering if he’d just shared too much of himself. But Chris was brimming with joy. Gruffly, he said, “Okay, babe.”

Tom’s head snapped up. “Okay?”

“Yes,” Chris smiled. “Okay.”

“So...” Tom’s brow furrowed. His lashes fluttered, caught in disbelief. “So, I—I can be *both* with you, Daddy?”

Chris sat up and crowded over Tom, cupping his face. “You have no idea how much of *everything* you are to me. You can be anything you want. Anything. You don’t have to hide. Not from me.”

It was a slow realization for Tom, a slow awakening in his mind of a freedom he’d never tasted before, and his tears were all the more sudden for it. His features collapsed and he started shaking as he wept, cupping his long hands over his face. Chris held him and rocked him slowly, letting Tom sob into his shoulder, hiccupping through years of fear and shame and uncertainty, threats to his physical body keeping him tense and anxious. He was, after all, only trying to understand the majestic place he deserved in this life. Chris had every intention of helping him realize that worth inside him.

Something Sweet Like Peaches

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

Tom spent most of the day in bed. Chris put the sheets to wash and then dressed the mattress again, scooping Tom up and whizzing him over the bed like an airplane, making Tom giggle and cover his face. They ate more pizza and Tom took another bath, groaning as he climbed to his feet, waving Chris away and taking small hesitant steps to the bathroom. In the mirror, he studied the bite mark on his neck and wondered how he would conceal it even though he didn't want to. From Jeff, at least. His mother probably wouldn't pay close enough attention. School wouldn't start for another month. It would be healed by then. The ache in his leg muscles was dulling somewhat, but at least he was able to move around, albeit with a heavy limp. Soaking in the hot water helped, his fingers pressed gently to his pussy, smoothing over the swollen folds.

When Chris stopped in to check on him, Tom was dozing against the porcelain. Distantly he heard the plug being pulled, the water starting its swirled descent, gurgling through the pipes. And then arms under his knees and shoulders lifted him, carrying him through the steam and into the warm bedroom. Chris had laid clean towels on the fresh sheets, and he placed Tom gently atop them. His legs fell open as Chris knelt on the floor before him, eyes trailing from his face down to his belly, resting finally on his groin.

"Daddy," Tom breathed, watching him. He touched the bite mark on his neck, and his pussy throbbed.

Saying nothing, Chris licked his lips and then pressed his mouth to the inside of Tom's knee, kissing along his inner thigh, eyes glued to his pussy still wet from his bath. A small noise trickled up Tom's throat as he widened his legs, eyes pleading.

The tip of Chris's nose nudged his sac, breathing him in, moaning at the scent. And then his mouth slid slowly over his cunt, wide tongue pressed down, licking a long stripe. Tom gasped and arched his back, hands grabbing at his own chest, squeezing his nipples. Heated now, Chris dragged Tom closer and sealed his mouth over his sweet entrance, nose pressed into his furred sac, Tom's cock slowly filling. Tongue delving in, Chris latched himself to Tom and suckled at his cunt, watching as Tom writhed and pinched his chest.

"Oh, Chris. Chris...Daddy, yes. Please."

Eyes hazed with lust, Tom stared down the length of his own quivering belly at where Chris feasted on him, the smallest, most tender smile tugging at his lips. Chris returned it, eyes lighting with mischief and affection, humming and digging a little deeper. Tom whimpered and took hold of Chris's wrists, clutching and tugging at him. His cock bobbed in the air, spilling a glistening dot of precum to his belly button.

He tasted as sweet as he smelled, like rainwater and damp earth, the bitter crush of rose petals. Chris kept his tongue soft, knowing how sore Tom was still, but he pressed deeper into him, his path slicked by Tom's juices and his own saliva. Their fingers laced, and they squeezed and held each other close, Tom beginning to vibrate.

“Daddy. I’m close. Shit,” Tom cursed, brows scrunched. “Chris, I’m—I’m—right there. Yes, right there.”

Chris stiffened his tongue and thrust in and felt the first pulse of Tom’s orgasm, pussy fluttering. He gave a small scream, bucking and twisting on the bed. Chris tossed an arm over his abdomen and held him down, flicking at his slit, ready for the next one. He slid two fingers into Tom, kneeling higher and taking his cock into his mouth next. Tom’s spine went taut, neck veins popping as his cock burst after two solid sucks, warm cum spilling down Chris’s throat. Gripping his cock by the base, Chris lapped up the sticky fluid, slapping the head against his tongue and smiling when Tom gasped, eyes rolling.

“Fuck, Daddy.” Tom swallowed thickly, lips trembling. “My heart’s racing.”

“Filthy mouth,” Chris grinned, ducking low and kissing Tom fast. “Only for me okay? No dirty mouth for anyone else.”

“Yes, Daddy. Anything for you.”

Dazed, Tom panted, cock still jumping in the afterglow. His body convulsed and he made a small noise, unable to control the waves of pleasure still flowing through him.

“I’m here, baby. Daddy’s here.” Chris settled above him, widening his legs. Tom gaped at him, seeing him through the mist in his eyes for the first time. Standing erect, Chris’s penis was longer than Tom’s, thick and veined with a gathering of dark blond hair at the base. Balls heavy and hanging, Chris crowded between Tom’s legs, spreading them, pulling him closer by the hips.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he whispered, soaking in every detail of Tom’s groin.

“Oh, Daddy...yes,” Tom pleaded, wrapping his long arms around Chris’s neck, lifting his legs to twine around him.

Chris kissed the sharp line of his jaw, and very carefully angled himself in. Tom dropped his head back and moaned Chris’s name, long and low.

"Fuck me, Daddy. Fuck me."

“Your little pussy is greedy for me, isn’t it? My filthy little girl.”

“Yes! Yes, call me that again. Say it again.”

Chris fell forward and caught himself on his forearms. Face an inch away from Tom’s, he pecked his lips with a soft kiss. “My sweet...filthy...little girl,” he growled, moving his hips and starting a steady, slow rhythm. Mouth parted, Tom’s eyes rolled up into his head, creamy cheeks flushed. “*Yes, Daddy.*”

His thrusts were erratic but still gentle, shallow enough that Tom wouldn’t feel discomfort after their marathon fuck. But he was so over sensitized, ribbons of pleasure coiling deep inside him, inching up from the root of his cock and into his belly, fingers clawing at Chris’s back, their mouths bumping in hard and desperate kisses. Tom came on a downward plunge, Chris rooting himself deep, cock sheathed in that pulsing heat.

“There you are. You’re so fucking beautiful, Tom. Let it all go. I want all of it.”

Tom continued spilling, long ribbons spinning up between their bellies, his cunt clenching around Chris.

“Daddy,” he panted over and over, a hand curled in Chris’s hair, feeling as if he might fall off the edge of the earth.

Tom felt stifled by the heat of the room, sweat beading on his collarbones. He blinked numbly. The slow whirr of the ceiling fan, Chris rocking up and down over him, the streak of light filtering in from behind the blue blanket tacked over the window, Tom absorbed it all, half conscious, so boneless, lying limp on that low bed. On his skin, his cum was drying, still warm, but he was too spent to touch it.

And then Chris was coming, too, swelling as he burst deep inside Tom, cum shooting thickly.

Suffused with a glow, by the frothing waves in his blood, Tom was staring down at where Chris was embedded inside him, brows high in confusion. Cupping his cheek, Chris kissed him again. “Outside of a rut, I won’t knot every time. But during a rut, I will, and that’s when my sperm can impregnate.” He eased them low on the bed, going soft inside Tom. “Does that make sense, babe?”

Tom swallowed and nodded after a moment. “When you’re in a rut, I can get pregnant.”

“Not unless you’re in your heat, too. If you’re in your heat, and I’m in my rut, then yes, you can get pregnant.” Tom glanced down, clearly unsure. “That’s why we need to mark our calendar, babe. Right now we’re a bit off in our cycles. You’ll get your heat before my ruts, it seems like. The chances of us getting a heat and rut at the same time seems unlikely. For now.”

“But will it happen?”

Chris rested his head beside Tom’s, rubbing his nose into his curls. “Maybe, babe. Eventually.”

“I don’t know if I want to have a baby right now, Chris.”

Chris leaned up, hand on Tom’s neck. “We’ll figure something out. I don’t want you doing something you aren’t ready for.” He sighed. “I was thinking condoms, but I haven’t found one that does much against my ruts. I destroy them.” Chris slipped out of him, and sat at the edge of the bed, head in his hands. “I’m so sorry, babe. I didn’t know we’d have to worry about this. Before, when I was in a rut, I was always prepared to have a beta with me. Alpha sperm doesn’t work on a beta, so I can’t get them pregnant. I can knot both betas and omegas, but only omegas can become pregnant from me. It’s confusing, I know. But this is different. A true mating. This is better, in all the ways I never could have imagined.”

Tom sat up quickly and folded himself over Chris from behind, hugging him hard. “I’m not a normal boy. I’m me. I don’t even know if I can have babies. Just because I get periods doesn’t mean anything can even grow inside me. But I think it’s important we prepare ourselves anyway. At least until we’re ready to have children. Me and you.”

“We’re not in any danger of that until our cycles sync up. It’ll be like a solar eclipse. It won’t happen very often.”

“You said that you went into a premature rut the last time I visited you. That you hadn’t had one since your second year in prison. Why did you lapse like that?”

“Because I wasn’t mated. Now that I’m mated to you, my body will recognize yours and I’ll start to get my ruts regularly.”

“And if we’re separated while I’m in heat or you’re in your rut?”

Chris smiled, and shook his head. “Then god help whatever person or building is keeping me from

you.”

Tom nudged his shorn hair, inhaling. “We don’t have to worry about that yet. It won’t happen for a long while, right? As long as I know I’ll have you while I’m in heat, and you’ll have me when you’re in your rut.”

“Always, babe.” Chris kissed his wrist.

Shifting to the side, Tom sat at Chris’s side, both legs folded. Chris felt such elation at being able to touch Tom how he wanted now. That there weren’t police officers with tranquilizers and batons standing by ready to separate them. Wrapping an arm around Tom’s hips, Chris tugged him closer.

“Daddy, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“After my last visit to you, when they took you away and put you in isolation.” Chris waited. “When you went through your rut alone, was it very painful? Was it terrible?”

Chris sighed, thinking a moment. “Because I was never mated before, my ruts before prison were hard, yes. But not painful. Until this last time. Before, I would get into lots of fights, talking shit to get a rise out of someone. It always worked. Got my blood pumping in a way I never used to feel before. It was a ruse. And then I would go fuck someone—.”

“Girls?” Tom piped in, eyes so round in question.

“Betas only. Some girls, yeah. But I’ve had sex with men before. Only, during my ruts, I went for girls because men took too long to prepare. Do you understand?” He brushed a curl off Tom’s forehead and Tom nodded, blushing. “My ruts last two days. This last time at the prison, shit. It was an eternity. Your scent was on me. On my clothes and my skin. On my face. You touched my face, didn’t you?”

“Yes. When you fell, I fell. I patted your cheeks and tried to get you to wake up. But they pulled me away from you.”

Chris’s jaw clenched, imagining some other person grabbing Tom’s arm so roughly.

“It was painful this time. I couldn’t find the relief I needed. You were all I saw. All I smelled. You weren’t there and I went fucking crazy.”

“What did you do?” Tom asked softly.

“The room they put me in was padded. Typical isolation room for an alpha. Someone was brought in for me—.” He hesitated. “Uh. There’s a program at the prison, and at most hospitals, of people who volunteer to...offer their services while a person is in a rut. It’s all consensual and they sign waivers and really, it’s a pretty good program because the institution can monitor the activity and people aren’t out in society fucking things up and causing all kinds of chaos. Anyway. She was brought in for me and I couldn’t even fucking look at her, Tom. I banged on the door and told them to get her out. I didn’t want her. She was taken away and I was left alone again, sniffing at my clothes and smashing against the walls, clawing at them, knowing you were out there somewhere, away from me. I was so hard. Ready to burst. Ready to knot. But I couldn’t. I lay on that bed and I fucked into my fist and I couldn’t knot. It was pointless. I came again and again, but with no knot, it isn’t nearly as satisfying.”

Tom’s brows puckered. “But doesn’t a knot seal a claim?”

“Only with a bite. If you knot, you just knot. You’re stuck together for a while and then you move on. But a bite *with* a knot is when a claim is sealed. I’ve knotted men and women before, but like I said, only betas. But biting and knotting together...” He stroked Tom’s hair, eyes dancing over his face. “I’ve only ever done that with you.”

“There’s so much I have to learn,” Tom whispered. “So much I have to keep straight in my head.”

“It’s a lot. But I know what I know about myself because I’m much older. You’re still a pup. A sweet, innocent pup. And I’ll help you. We’ll learn together.”

Tom lifted his chin and Chris pressed their lips together, slow and chaste, both breathing in the other’s scent.

“My chest has been so full these last few days, Chris. Just here.” He pressed a hand to his solar plexus, fingers wide. “It’s this huge emotion in me. Whenever I see you, it throbs and feels bigger.”

Chris smiled. “What do you think that means, babe?”

Tom blushed and glanced down. “I don’t know. Something bigger than myself.”

“Now that we’re mated, your body and your heart will feel a lot of things when it comes to me. Some of it is simple pheromones, doubled, or tripled when we’re near each other. That can lead to some very real emotions. It’s our bond, growing.” He tucked a finger under Tom’s chin and lifted it to meet his eyes. His voice fell to a whisper. “Does it make you feel better knowing that I feel the same when I look at you too?”

Tom smiled gratefully, and nodded.

“I can’t believe you’re real, Tom.”

Tom grinned. “I am.”

“My sweet boy. My sweet girl. You’re everything I wanted.”

“Chris,” Tom whispered, and cuddled him against his chest, running his fingers over the shorn part of Chris’s hair, tracing the tattoos that curved from his nape to the strong hinges of his jaw. Chris sniffed along Tom’s neck, breathing in sex and something sweet like peaches.

“We’re each other’s forever now,” he whispered, kissing Chris’s forehead.

They slept again, Tom’s belly rumbling with something faint and familiar, but he was too tired to notice. Curled into the hollow space beneath Chris, he didn’t wake in the middle of the night, didn’t startle from sleep wondering if he heard footsteps outside his door, if his knob was turning slowly, cowering against his pillows until he had assured himself it was only the old house settling. His sleep was deep and empty, like being sunk into a cool earthen hole, the wide yawning sky above him with its twinkling stars keeping their comforting vigil.

And some time later, when the glowing finger-curls of dawn lightened the walls and floor of the bedroom, Chris shifted and was roused from sleep by the sharp bite of iron in the air. Nostrils flaring, he pushed up to his elbows and peered down at Tom, still sleeping with his arms tossed over his head, blond brow furrowed, little bow-mouth parted.

“Babe?” His rasp disappeared into the room, too low to draw Tom from sleep. Still he smelled it. Where was it? What was it? He glanced down at his own chest, his own hands. Spotless. Shuffling to his knees, he tossed the blankets off, Tom a sprawled bundle of long moist limbs on the

mattress. Taking his knee, Chris lifted Tom's leg and parted it from its twin, eyes widening at the sticky map of blood patches on Tom's inner thighs. "Oh, shit."

Tom opened his eyes with a gasp, and he sat up quickly.

Calloused fingers dragged through the smears of blood, and Chris's eyes widened as he lifted his hand and stared. "Tom. Baby, did I hurt you? Are you okay? Tom, did I hurt—?"

"No," Tom cut in quietly, taking Chris's hand and squeezing his fingers. "No. Daddy. You didn't. It's—I think it's my period."

They were quiet for a moment, Tom holding his legs apart so his thighs wouldn't touch. Chris's eyes were drawn to his cunt, tainted red. He burst into motion.

"Daddy?" There was a note of panic in Tom's voice, and Chris glanced at him while he shrugged into jeans.

"I'll go get what you need, baby. Pads or tampons, or whatever. Pills? Like menstrual pills? Do you take those?"

Tom shook his head, sheet gathered to his chest. "Never tried them. But you're going now?"

"Yeah. The Walmart on Palo Verde is open twenty hour hours."

"I was just thinking of where I could nab some from. I was too out of it before to remember about my period."

"No, babe. No more stealing for you. I'll get you everything."

Tom was nodding slowly, a realization dawning on his face. Chris shrugged into his boots and then leaned over Tom on the bed. "I was serious. You need something, you tell me. If your mom won't provide those things for you, I definitely will. You won't ever bleed again without cotton on you or in you somewhere okay?" He clasped the side of Tom's head, gently. "You won't go through that again."

Tom nodded quickly, blinking tears away. "Thank you, Daddy."

"You're welcome, babe." He straightened. "Good. So. Which do I get?"

"Regular. But the ones in a pink and yellow box? I stole three from this girl's backpack one time at school, and they felt so much more comfortable than the ones in the girls' bathroom dispenser."

"Pink and yellow box. Got it. Anything else?"

"And a Snickers bar? And I think the new Dan Brown came out in paperback?" His eyes were wide and hopeful, almost dewy. Chris's heart flipped, realizing he couldn't deny Tom a thing. He pecked him on the lips, and then came back for another, both clinging and moaning into their mouths. Panting, Tom watched him leave and then flopped back onto the pillows, a grin splitting his still-sleepy face. He lay on his side so that he wouldn't risk staining Chris's sheets, but he could feel the rumble of deeper cramps in his gut. And yet he felt his vagina pulse and throb between his legs, squelching with yet another additional fluid. He wondered if this was how it would be. Get his heat, and then a period right after. Chris had warned him that Tom could only get pregnant when in heat, and Chris could only impregnate when in a rut. Did this mean that when he finally did become pregnant, he wouldn't get a heat or a period for that time? As a warning, a telltale sign of that pregnancy?

Curling himself around Chris's pillow, Tom sighed and half-shrugged. There was still so much to learn. But if all that about their cycles were true, then they wouldn't have to worry about a pregnancy for a long time. Not until they synched up.

Chris returned within a half hour, carrying a plastic bag with what Tom needed. After twenty thank-you's and a wet kiss, Tom excused himself to the bathroom and quickly gave himself a rinse in the shower before toweling off and fixing a tampon in. The instructions on any tampon box were always shit, and he'd had to teach himself how to maneuver the tube of cotton between the folds of his cunt and in. Watching YouTube videos at the library with his earphones plugged in, he memorized the information and then applied it later on when alone in the bathroom, hoping his mother wouldn't become curious for once and ask him if he was alright. The instructions on the box said nothing about how he had to stoop at the waist and spread his legs, about how he would have to shimmy the plastic tube in small circles until it finally breached him, dry and rough on his inner walls, a kind of chafe that lingered long after he removed his bloodied fingers. They said nothing about how there was that tight ring of muscle a couple of inches in, how he would flinch when bullying the tampon through it, how it would burn a little, how he would straighten a little stiffly and feel that foreign object sitting crooked inside him until he inevitably forgot about it, the string dangling as a reminder. The first time it happened, Tom wished he could have asked his mom questions about how to do it right, how long it was going to last, that if he wasn't careful, would the tampon slip inside him too far and be lost forever? But he couldn't. It was strangers on the internet whom he learned from, watching the online videos and reading the column threads, learning by default.

And here he was, with his Alpha, open about his body's functions, the many irregularities of his person. He nearly wept again from the relief.

He wondered if his mother was worried about where he was. In all probability, as she often did, she'd fallen asleep and left for work like she did every morning without checking whether he was even home. Jeff would wonder, though. Jeff would look for him. Or wait for him.

Climbing in beside Chris again, they fell into each other's arms, chest to chest, groins and thighs pressed together. They dozed and shifted, hands on each other, always close. When his rumbling stomach woke Tom a while later, he lay half-awake, thinking. As Chris snored lightly, big arm thrown across Tom's chest, he touched the tattoos drawn on that sculpted arm, careful with worship, loving the minute details, the colors and the great fear in them, the danger. His touch must have tickled because Chris woke up, grumbling about the early hour.

"Does it feel different," Tom asked, turning in his arms and running his fingers through Chris's shorn hair. He liked the way it tickled his fingertips. "Sleeping in this bed versus the one in prison?"

"Mmph," Chris agreed, eyes closed again. "Definitely. I had back problems my first year there. I couldn't get used to the pile of cotton they give you for a mattress. Now I figure I could sleep on a dirt floor and not be bothered."

Tom watched him, loving the small ways his face moved when he talked. "How long were you in there?"

"Six years."

Tom gasped. "So long?"

"My original sentence was for three. But I had to get into fights at the beginning. Keep up my rep. It's all a man has in there."

“My hero,” Tom whispered, already imagining the violence, the blood and injuries. It sent a tiny thrill through his body, at imagining Chris so unhinged, all that strength let loose, the damage he could cause. He’d already gotten a taste of it the last time he visited him at the prison.

“Have you ever killed someone? Like broken someone’s neck or stabbed them?”

Chris chuckled. “No. I’ve never killed anyone. And breaking someone’s neck is a hard thing to do. Takes a lot of emotion. A lot of passion to see the act through.”

Tom nodded and cuddled closer. Chris kissed his forehead.

“And did you get any tattoos in prison?”

“Fuck no,” Chris said, making a face. “I did nothing that would risk getting some kind of infection.”

“That’s good,” Tom agreed.

“I know you’re probably wondering about any sex diseases. Or blood diseases. I have none, okay? I got tested about a month before being released. It’s all part of the paperwork. And I’m clean. I would never have put you at risk.”

Tom curled deeper against him. “Thank you, Chris.”

They fell silent, the throbbing light of late morning shining in hotly from behind the blue blanket.

“So, babe. What does Jeff do for a living?”

Tom tensed, and started to pull away. But Chris tightened his arms, trapping him.

“Tom. You can tell me.”

Tom bit his lip. “He calls me a piece of shit,” he said quietly. “I don’t like talking about him.”

Chris bent low and laid soft kisses on Tom’s hairline. “I know, baby. But, please answer my question.”

Tom sighed. “He travels around the state. Selling some kind of computer program.”

“Is he home today?”

“Maybe. Mom won’t be. But sometimes he goes to a bar on the east side. Something called Dragon Eggs.”

“Dragon Eyes?” Chris said.

“Yes. That’s it.”

Chris pondered. “Good,” he murmured. “That’s real good.” Tom looked at him in question. “Think you can ride today?” Tom stretched out his legs, and nodded. “Let’s shower and I’ll take you for breakfast.”

Tom showered – again – alone in the master bath, bloodied tampon tossed in the bin, string of viscous muck slipping down his thigh. Even that small object had felt big inside him, his flesh very sore from the fucking and the knotting. He cleaned gingerly between his legs, wincing at the tender skin of his pussy, liking how the water pulsed at the top of his spine. Still, he was content to

have some alone time after Chris had wandered into the kitchen for more water. His body was still thrumming with a tender glow, and he hoped his heart could take so much of Chris at once.

Adjusting the showerhead, he wondered how Chris even fit in that little space, smiling as suds dripped down his cheeks. Chris, whose soap smelled of pines, whose large hands cradled Tom's skull as they slept, whose voice and laugh were like low thunder, a rumble across the kaleidoscope desert sky during monsoons. So big and gentle, his Chris, with just enough of a spark of lightning under his fingertips when he touched Tom, and all the threat of a storm when protecting him. Tom sighed, his chest so full of emotion.

He was sad to see their cum wash down the drain, but it left his skin very soft and clear. He rinsed himself once more and then shut the water off. Outside the door, he heard Chris moving about, and then his soft knock.

"Babe?"

Tom dried himself with a towel. "Come in."

Chris stuck his head in, strands of his blond hair falling over his forehead.

"You okay?"

"Yes. I feel less like jelly today."

"Good. Take these." Chris left a bottle of water and two pain reliever pills on the counter. Tom smiled and tossed them back gratefully.

Chris took a quick shower while Tom lingered at the sink and unwrapped another tampon. He stuck it in, wincing only slightly at the burn, both aggravated and lessened by sex with Chris, sore and soaked still. In the foggy mirror, he shaved his face carefully, applying some of Chris's soothing lotion after. After brushing his teeth with Chris's white toothbrush, he put on a change of clothes he'd packed in his bag, feeling brazen and wholly different from who he'd been before the motorcycle ride a few nights ago. Chris had kept his purple panties and refused to tell Tom where he'd stashed them, promising with a grin to buy him a replacement pair, so Tom tugged on a pair of regular briefs. Not that he would have been able to wear them now. They were ruined.

"I wanna show you something in a minute," Chris said, running the towel over his hair, dripping water onto the bathmat. Tom grinned and nodded.

Taking the chance to look around Chris's home, Tom soaked in every detail: the limp leather couch, the battered coffee table with its motorcycle magazines and Playboys and TV Guides, and further in at a lopsided table and small kitchen. It was small, but so lovingly lived in, Tom smiled at the idea that he might be able to spend more time here.

Hand in hand, he followed Chris out into the sunlight, guarding his eyes from the bright glare. They walked slowly, trudging through the tall grass, Tom still limping noticeably. He took the chance to glimpse at the empty land all around them. They were so far from everything. Far to the east were the San Jose Mountains, brown and purple jagged peaks rising from the earth, brushed with puffy white clouds in the distance. Otherwise, there was nothing, only the faint shimmer of white south of them, the bright metal of the city. They passed by a scraggly, blooming garden, mostly weeds that crept wildly, crawling and choking one side of the house, making Tom think of those little homes in fairy tales that the heroine always stumbled across when she was lost in the woods. He caught a whiff of the underlying scent on Chris's skin, and he knew suddenly that Chris spent a lot of time on his porch, just feet from where the garden's fragrance wafted freely, the

desert brush and thickets spreading wide before them. Saguaros and tumbleweeds and ancient cactus barrel stood like silent sentinels on this small piece of land. Cigarette butts littered the creaking floorboards and dusty backyard, and Tom again marveled at how nice Chris smelled, so unlike Jeff and his odor of ash and sour breath. Chris was clean, even if his fingers seemed perpetually stained with engine grease.

Chris led him around the side of the house and towards a building that looked more like a workshop than a garage. Just as overgrown with weeds, Tom could still tell it was lovingly cared for and an obvious addition to the property. Chris dug out a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked the two large doors kept sealed by a padlock and chain. He pulled them open and Tom got his first glimpse inside. Tall and lined with sheet metal and supported by thick beams of wood, the garage was deep but sturdy, able to hold two full sized cars. Tom, open mouthed, took it all in. But instead of cars, the middle of the space was taken up by a center worktable laden with tools and engine parts. Shelves lined the walls, full of more miscellaneous mechanical stuff, too unfamiliar for Tom to identify. State plates—Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, California, Colorado—were nailed in place next to posters of half-naked women draped over the hoods of cars or motorcycle handlebars. Tom blushed and shifted his eyes away.

There were two bikes parked in the other half of the garage. All in various shades of black and dark red and gleaming chrome, they looked somewhat similar to the one he vaguely remembered having ridden in on. Taking his hand again, Chris led him inside.

“This is all yours?” Tom asked, whispering as if he was in some kind of church.

“Yeah. A friend of mine kept an eye on it while I was locked up.”

“And these are your bikes?”

Chris smiled. “The one I left out front is a Harley. 2008 Softail Custom. And those two,” he said, pointing to the ones parked beside the workbench. “The one on the right is also a Harley. But a 2009 Cross Bones. And the left one is a Ducati Monster 796. The Italian.” He spoke so lovingly about them, his voice soft with affection. “I had another, but I wrecked it just before I was taken in.”

Tom couldn’t stop staring at him. He leaned his head on Chris’s shoulder, pressing his nose to his shirt, his hand curving around his waist. He smelled of clean sweat and something thicker, like motor oil. Beneath that Tom caught that trace of floral, reminding him of the color purple.

“Where did you sneak my lace undies to now?” he said, pressing himself to Chris’s front.

“Somewhere safe.” Chris said, mock seriously. He nodded. “Very safe. Just for me. I’m keeping those.”

“But they were my only pair, Daddy.” He pouted and traced a finger over his collarbone. Chris’s eyes were drawn to the bruised bite on Tom’s neck. He touched it softly with his thumb.

“I love seeing this on you.”

“I love being seen with it.”

“Then by all means, let’s get you seen. Hungry?”

Tom nodded, eyes crinkling. “Yes.”

Chris rummaged around a cabinet and produced a scuffed and worn helmet. It was full-sized with a

jaw protector and visor that came down over the eyes, tinted so black one couldn't see in.

He presented it to Tom. "For you. It used to be mine. My first one, actually. But I've stopped wearing them."

Tom took it, careful with how he held it. "For me?"

"Yeah. Put it on."

Tom did. It fit snug, but comfortably, and the visor guarded from bright sun glare and harsh winds.

"But why don't you wear one?"

His voice came out muffled and Chris smiled, looking ten shades darker behind the visor.

"Because I feel it blocks my vision."

"Why do I have to wear it?"

"Because you're more important. Come on." He chained up the garage again and then led Tom back across the dusty yard to the Harley they rode in on. Chris threw on some Aviators and climbed on the bike. He gripped Tom's hand as Tom slowly lifted his leg to straddle the back of the bike. He squirmed around until he was comfortable. With the helmet, he was unable to rest his head on Chris's back, and he shared his disappointment.

"I'll hold you again soon, silly boy. For now, safety."

Tom huffed and sat straight in the seat, wrapping his arms around Chris's waist.

They took to the hot desert streets. The helmet offered him anonymity, as well as protection from the deafening winds, and Tom felt more freedom in where he could look. Chris was quite the sight on the motorcycle, Tom was pleased to see. Most drivers stared after them as they roared past, Tom smiling wide. The vibrations between his legs actually felt really nice. He was worried the bike ride might prove uncomfortable, but it was a soothing rumble, making him pulse with longing for the man seated before him.

It was all still a bit confusing. He'd survived his first heat. His first *heat*. He never would have guessed that he would end up an omega. And now on top of it all, his period had come. Figuring it all out would be tiresome. But what Chris told him in bed made sense. Maybe something hadn't clicked on time inside him, something that maybe had needed an extra phase to tumble into place. Either way, he was starting to believe his future didn't look so bleak with Chris beside him. Chris would help him. Tom knew he would. He wouldn't judge Tom for being half boy, half girl. For having periods and liking pretty things, but still loving his masculine name and loving his cock played with. No more sleeping with fear. No more looking over his shoulder. No more hiding what he realized he really loved about himself.

And he wouldn't be so alone anymore.

Bowled over by a rush of emotion, Tom squeezed Chris's waist, heart flipping at the firm squeeze Chris gave his wrists in turn.

The diner they pulled into was, thankfully, not the one where his mother worked. The waitress led them to a corner booth, not once batting an eye at Tom's giant bite mark. Being the favored indication of possession or claim, it wasn't uncommon to see people walking around with bite marks on their necks, all various shades of red and purple. Tom felt a little flip of excitement at

being included in that group.

Menu propped open in front of him, Tom skimmed the choices while Chris lit a cigarette, blowing smoke up toward the ceiling, where a blue haze hovered.

"What can I get?" Tom asked, eyes zipping up and down the columns of food listed.

"Anything you want, babe," Chris said. He scooted close and pointed to number six. "I always get that. Haven't had it in years. Literally."

Tom smiled, reading aloud, "Four pancakes, three eggs, three sausages and hash browns." His eyes widened. "That's a lot of food, Daddy."

Chris laughed and ruffled his hair affectionately. "I'm a lot of man."

Tom blushed, nudging Chris's foot like they used to do back at the prison.

Chris leveled him with a heated gaze just as the waitress approached. In the end, Chris ordered the number six with coffee—black, no sugar—and Tom ordered a plate of French toast with powdered sugar, a vanilla milkshake, a bowl of fruit, and two eggs with sausage.

"Anything else, honey?" the waitress said, gathering their menus.

"Nope," Tom said, grinning, cheeks pink with excitement. He took Chris's hand under the table once she'd left. "I can't remember the last time I ate out."

"You're such a sweet kitten," Chris murmured, tapping his cigarette in the ashtray.

When their food arrived, Tom's eyes widened and he dug right in, hunkering over his food, elbows out. He scooped forkful after forkful into his mouth, eyes closing in bliss. Chris watched him, cutting into his own pancakes slowly.

"You know you don't have to eat in a hurry around me, right?"

Tom froze, cheeks full. "Wha?"

Chris smiled and touched his thigh. "No one's going to hurt you here mid meal. You can take your time."

Tom swallowed, and then took a sip from his milkshake. "I didn't realize I was doing it."

Chris wiped the milk foam from Tom's upper lip, eyes going soft. "It's okay, baby. I just don't want you to make yourself sick."

They finished their meal in companionable silence, Tom practically bouncing from enjoyment of his food. Afterward, so full and sleepy, he got on the bike behind Chris, helmet locked in, eyes dancing over the bleak desert land.

It became apparent they were heading east when Tom saw the city's downtown skyline start to fade behind them. The parking lot at the Dragon Eyes was half full. Chris pulled into the back, parking the bike by the service entrance. He lifted the visor on Tom's helmet and stuck his thumb in to stroke the ridge of his cheek.

"Keep it on. I'll be right back."

Sitting on the bike, Tom watched Chris disappear in through the employee entrance. A hot wind

howled around him, burning his retinas. Patting his stomach as another growling cramp hit, he closed the visor and felt submerged in a strange kind of silence, like he was in outer space wearing an anti-gravity suit. From this vantage point, there wasn't a soul in sight, only more desert stretching out behind the bar. He spotted a runty coyote stalking along the fence, eyes sharp on the dumpsters.

After a minute, Chris came back out and lit up a smoke. He leaned casually against the wall, just to the side of the door, holding up a hand to let Tom know to stay put.

Tom gulped, starting to get an uneasy feeling in his gut. He shifted on the leather seat, pussy still aching despite the pills. He was so wet again, just the sight of Chris enough to drench his underwear.

When the door opened, it hid Chris from view. He quietly set his lit cigarette on the top of the flat rail leading up to the door and straightened. Out of the open door came Jeff, shading his eyes and talking with someone. Catching sight of Tom on the lone bike, he stalled.

He knows it's me, Tom thought. But there was no way he could. His helmet concealed his face.

"Hey, who did you say—," Jeff started, turning back to the man who had led him outside. But the man avoided all eye contact and simply closed the door, locking him out. Before Jeff could see Chris, Chris stepped up behind him and grabbed a fistful of his hair, slamming him face first into the brick wall.

Jeff screamed, a loud bloody gurgle, and crumpled at Chris's feet. He grabbed his face with both hands, thick blood pouring from in between. Tom gasped, not quite believing what he'd just seen. Jumping up, he leaned forward on the bike, hands coming up to wrap around the handles.

In the shadow of the dirty bar, Chris walked a slow circle around Jeff, who was sobbing and crying out brokenly. And then he squatted beside him, boots crunching loudly, wrapping a big hand around the back of the struggling man's neck.

He laughed low and deep, a wicked sort of chuckle that had another sluice of wetness dripping from Tom.

"You fucking liar," Chris growled, squeezing Jeff's slippery neck.

Jeff grimaced, eyes wide with fear. "*What?*" he gritted out. "Who are you!"

"You're no fucking alpha," Chris whispered, and Tom inhaled where he sat, frozen. "*I'm* an alpha. And the thing about alphas, Jeff, is that we can smell each other, and our omegas. It's all in the scent. Smell an alpha, take caution. Smell an alpha's omega, and you fucking beat it. What is it with you, huh?" He yanked Jeff closer, Jeff's knees dragging on the asphalt. "You like scaring little boys? Like pretending you're a big bad something, when really you're a sad little nothing? Huh? Answer me!"

Jeff flinched and sobbed around his broken nose, wheezing wetly.

"Hey," Chris said. "Listen. Take a look at that kid over there," he said, pointing at Tom. He winked at him, and Tom felt his heart skip a beat. In his jeans, his cock tightened. "Take it off, baby. Just for a minute."

With shaking hands, Tom lifted off the helmet, the hot desert sun blinding him. The scabs at his neck stretched and pulled, and Tom touched them briefly. When Jeff's panicked eyes settled on him, they narrowed in anger. He started to rise, but Chris yanked him back down, hand tightening

on his neck.

“Hey, I didn’t say you could fucking move. Now, listen to me,” Chris said, shifting to squat down in front of him, blocking Tom from his view. Jeff sobbed wetly, even in all his rage, nose broken horribly. “You know Tom. He lives with you. But Tom is mine. And it’s come to my attention that you’ve been touching what is mine. And not even just a friendly pat on the back or a nice hug. Those things I understand. But you’ve been beating on my boy here, trying to force that crooked dick of yours into him, and that’s just not acceptable. At all.”

Jeff started struggling again, legs kicking, but one hard press into his jugular and he fell limp, breathing heavy through his mouth. Blood poured sluggishly from both nostrils.

“See that bite mark? Means he’s mine. I’ve claimed him. Other alphas will know. But you? You lying sack of shit. You aren’t an alpha, as much as you wish you could be. So I’ve come to warn you with simple words. Don’t touch him. He’s not yours to touch. Lay one finger on him, and I’ll know because he’ll only be covered in my scent. If I smell you on him, if I find out that you’ve tried to harm him in any way, I’ll be visiting you again.”

Tom stared, amazed at the crackling energy rolling off Chris despite all his dead calm. All low brows and flared nose, Chris glared coldly down at Jeff, holding him still with one hand. With his other hand, he reached for Jeff’s left arm.

“What are you doing?” Jeff wheezed, eyes darting frantically from Chris and to his arm and back again. “I—I won’t touch the kid again, alright! Just—just leave me alone!”

“See,” Chris said, tilting his head to the side. “That’s just not gonna cut it for me. Lower life forms like you need to be shown to learn a thing. Because you’re the absolute worst kind of filth in my eyes and I just don’t trust the words of a piece of shit like you.”

Jeff’s eyes widened and they cut to Tom, who stood straddling the bike, chest rising with quick breaths, helmet clutched in trembling hands.

Very slowly, Chris began angling Jeff’s arm behind his back, the position awkward and unnatural. The more Jeff struggled, the harder Chris squeezed his neck, until his eyes were bulging and he was flopping helplessly on the glass-strewn concrete, like some gutted and desperate fish. Arm positioned, he pressed Jeff flat on his back with a boot on his twisted shoulder.

Tom strained to hear Chris’s whispers.

“You’re not going to touch him again.” He began pressing his boot down. “You’re not going to speak to him again unless it’s nicely.” Jeff heaved under the boot, face twisting in pain. “And you will definitely no longer call him any names, like faggot or fairy or piece...” Jeff’s shoulder shook violently, pushed to the point of natural resistance, his other bloodied hand scrabbling desperately at Chris’s jeans. “...of...” Chris smiled, leg bending at the knee as he leaned all of his weight forward. “...shit...” There was that point where Jeff’s eyes landed on Tom just behind Chris, so swollen with fear and pain, Tom doubted Jeff was able to see anything at all.

“No! No, no, no, *please*—.”

And then Chris lifted his boot and slammed it down hard.

The bone broke loudly, making Tom jump from his perch on the motorcycle. In the dry air of that hot July afternoon, Jeff screamed, voice gurgling with blood from his shattered nose. Arm bent behind him, he kicked and rolled, gutted cries screamed into the cracked pavement. Chris walked

around the flailing man. He picked up his cigarette and took a long drag. Across the way, his and Tom's eyes met and Tom felt his erection press painfully against the tight weave of his jeans, his pussy throbbing and slicked.

"Daddy," he whispered, in complete awe, and Chris smiled, smoke curling out between his teeth.

He walked back to Jeff and nudged his jaw with the toe of his boot, arm still trapped beneath him. Just that small movement had Jeff howling again, but weakly, strength sapped.

"Next time, it's going to be your leg. Or your pelvis. Or your jaw. Something important like that. I'm sure you have enough sense not to tell the cops." He clapped a wide palm to Jeff's neck, as if they were old buddies, and then felt around in his back pockets. Pulling out a faded leather wallet, Chris smiled his thanks and stood.

Sticking the cigarette between his lips, he returned to Tom's side and blew out the smoke. Bending, he caught Tom's mouth in a hard kiss. When they parted, Tom was breathless and so painfully hard, he couldn't move his legs. Chris took him by the waist and lifted him to his seat, sliding in front of him. He started the bike, the rumble loud and starting to feel like the most familiar thing in the world to Tom. Putting his helmet back on, he snuggled against Chris's back and they drove out into the street, bypassing the side of the bar, where a man lay broken and bleeding, crying softly into the burning wind, never to hurt Tom again.

Before heading into the house, Chris hunched over a small fire behind his garage and piece-by-piece burned the wallet and all that came with it, including the money and receipts and coupons and driver's license.

"It'll be reported as a mugging at the hospital," Chris murmured to Tom, who stood just behind him, eyes squinting in the acrid smoke. Afterward, he tamped down on the flames with his boot, the remnants of Jeff's wallet disintegrated to ash.

Inside the house, he washed his hands and eyed Tom, who trailed him from room to room. He finally crowded him against the kitchen wall, smothering him with kisses, hands roaming over his body, murmuring if he was okay.

Tom nodded and returned his kisses, hips rolling forward.

Chris him pressed to the wall, his mouth on him again, and Tom moaned because he'd missed it already. Big hands swiped under his shirt, feeling callous on his sensitive skin. That hot tongue pushed between his lips and nudged Tom's own, licking at it.

Tom had only ever kissed one person before Chris, his cousin Anna, when they were eleven. It was wet and slimy and very uncomfortable, even when they'd done it again the day after. Still, it had given him a feel for kissing and what to expect, but nothing could have prepared him for the great muscle that was Chris's tongue, probing into his mouth, vibrating with their groans. Hands felt over his ass and then he was being lifted, hefted up against the wall. He squealed, legs wrapping around Chris's waist, grabbing his shoulders for balance.

"I've got you. I won't let you fall," Chris promised, burying his face in Tom's neck. He sucked at the tender point at the base of his throat, nipping with his teeth, letting his tongue glide over his bite mark, wetting it and making it glisten. Tom cupped Chris's head and held him to his throat, undulating his hips, where his cock pressed against Chris's abdomen, trapped by jeans and cotton briefs.

"Daddy," Tom breathed, and hissed when Chris groaned, thunder vibrating through his blood.

“Tom,” Chris rasped suddenly, pulling back. Full lips swollen, Tom could only imagine what his own looked like. There was a high blush on Chris’s cheeks, eyes wide with what Tom could only liken to love.

“No one’s gonna hurt you again,” Chris groaned, mouthing at Tom’s neck. “They’ll feel worse pain. I promise you.”

Fresh Pup

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

As much as he didn't want to, Tom knew it was best if he went home, if only not to alarm anybody by his extended absence. He knew Jeff wouldn't be a problem anymore, but his mother might actually realize he was gone and think he was kidnapped or something. Now that his heat had passed, he was much calmer, if not still crampy. But his thoughts weren't jumbled and he wasn't tormented by the bellyaches and the twinges in his bones that had somehow been even worse than what he felt now with his period. Chris had rescued him from Jeff and any other alpha that had been sniffing out his budding scent, and the thought made him feel much safer about being on his own. Once home, he would mark on his calendar the dates of his first heat, taking care to catalog his heats and Chris's ruts, estimating when they would next occur, and if they would ever coincide.

Trying not to be sad about leaving, he packed his bag slowly and methodically, eyes straying to the bed with its rumpled sheets still smelling of them both. He would miss sleeping here with Chris. He would miss that solid warmth, those arms holding him tightly, never waking once because he was afraid Jeff had finally broken into his room. Here, in the embrace of his ex-con, there was no fear.

Before taking him home, Chris pulled into a phone store and parked the bike in the shade of the building.

"What are we doing here?" Tom asked, tugging off his helmet. He left it on the seat of the bike and followed Chris inside.

But Tom didn't need an answer, because after only twenty minutes they were back outside, fiddling with the new phone Chris had just bought for him.

"Chris, this is...too much! I couldn't—."

"You can," Chris said, leaning against his bike, shades reflecting Tom's shocked face. "I want you to have one. I want to be able to get ahold of you. And you to have a way to get ahold of me. When you need me."

Tom wiped at the screen with his thumb, mouth hanging open. The screen was smooth as silk, with a starry background and apps that danced when he shifted them around. He'd never had a cell phone before. Everyone at school had one, fingers dancing quickly over the bright screens, earphones plugged in, yapping into the tiny receivers. He'd barely managed to convince his mother to get him a computer, and it was a cheap secondhand laptop that heated up too fast, the battery draining in under an hour. This felt like Chris was giving him a star from the night sky.

Tom swallowed and cradled the phone carefully in his hands.

"Thank you, Chris," he said softly. "This is amazing."

Chris smiled, rolling a toothpick between his teeth.

“Hey,” he said gently, and hugged Tom to his side. “You ever need anything, you tell me. Okay? Anything.”

Tom nodded. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl.”

They exchanged numbers, Tom still in awe about all the apps already installed and those he could download later, all the games and access to the Internet. He gripped it tightly, giddy with the knowledge of the sudden freedom he could find in this one small device, the secure and safe line he had to Chris, no matter the time of day.

They hopped on the bike again and Chris turned it south. Phone tucked safely into his jacket, Tom sighed in the quiet bubble of his helmet, the hot desert air stinging him everywhere but his face. Still, tears pricked his vision the closer they got to his house, and he clung to Chris all the harder. Once parked at his curb, Tom kept his eyes shut tight, not wanting to admit that their time together was over for now.

“I’ll come back for you,” Chris said quietly, feeling the trembling in Tom’s arms. His hands were curled into his shirt, and he touched them gently.

“I don’t want to,” Tom sniffed, clutching at Chris like a baby monkey.

“He knows better than to try again.”

Gathering himself, Tom nodded and let Chris go, unfolding his legs and setting them on firm ground. He removed his helmet and wiped his eyes. Chris took the helmet and handed Tom the bag with the phone manual and charger.

“Where’s your school?” he asked.

“I go to Saguaro Heights. Over on Glenn.”

Chris laughed. “Really? I went there.”

“You did?” Tom grinned.

“Yeah. For a time. Like fifteen years ago,” Chris said, talking around his cigarette. Tom took it from between his lips and brought it to his own, taking a long drag. The pungent smoke filled his lungs and he let it out as smoothly as he could, unable to stop his eyes from watering. He coughed slightly, handing the cigarette back to him.

Chris watched, mouth parted, and closed his eyes when Tom leaned in, kissing him fast.

“Thank you, Daddy,” he whispered, tilting his neck up to display his stark bite mark, and walking backwards up the drive to let himself in through the front door. Chris stayed out on the street for a minute, looking down at the helmet in his lap. He finally took one last inhale from the cigarette and crushed it under his boot, pulling the helmet on and revving the engine.

Tom’s groin tightened, watching him through the peep hole at the door. Finally resigning himself to the fact that he was gone, Tom sighed and headed to his room, the house feeling too eerie and quiet without Jeff lurking about.

**

Jeff eventually did return to the house later that night. Earlier in the day, Tom's mother had breezed in and saw Tom in the kitchen eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She'd tossed him a distracted, quick greeting – as if Tom hadn't been gone for *days*, as if he wasn't sporting the biggest bite mark on his neck – before slapping her purse on the counter and disappearing down the hall. When Jeff failed to show at his prescribed hour, she'd been beside herself with worry. Tom sat in his room sulking, realizing she'd never panic like that if Tom were gone for hours at a time. But maybe it was a blessing in disguise, as it afforded him more freedom to sneak away and be with Chris. Still, he could hear her exclaiming loudly from the front door when Jeff arrived in a taxi, face and arm bandaged.

Curled up in the corner behind his bed, Tom sat playing with his phone plugged in the outlet to charge before sleep, trying to ignore their voices from down the hall.

“What in the world happened, darlin’?”

“I’m alright, Susie. Don’t make a fuss.” His voice was nasally and muffled, and Tom grinned.

“Gone for hours and you don’t want me to make a fuss?”

“I ran into a bit of trouble is all.”

Tom froze, the game on his phone firing fruit cannons all by itself.

“Trouble? What happened?”

Jeff said nothing for a minute and Tom imagined they’d sat at one of the sofas. “I was mugged.”

“Where?”

“At the Dragon Eyes.”

“Oh, Jeff, what were you doing at the Dragon Eyes?”

“Having a goddamn drink, Susie, what do you think?”

Their voices quieted down after that, and Tom gave up trying to eavesdrop. He went back to his game, the screen lighting up his face in the dark room. And then the game paused automatically as a text notification popped up.

“Daddy,” Tom breathed, smiling. He opened the text.

<are you okay?>

He replied quickly.

<yes daddy. Im charging my phone and going to bed>

<you like your phone?>

<I love it! There are so many free games I can get>

<good baby. My sheets still smell of you>

<I miss you already>

<I miss you too.>

<I want to sleep with you every night>

<you will baby. I promise.>

Tom fell asleep with the phone curled up under his chin, ready to feel the tiny vibrations of any new messages.

**

The rest of the week passed painstakingly slowly for Tom. His period went away after the second day, and he stored the rest of the unused tampons under his bed for the next month. Chris began work with his friend who owned a mechanic shop, repairing vehicles and motorcycles, changing engine oil and replacing worn brake pads. They texted all day. Chris would message Tom with questions about his day, what he was wearing, if he'd played with himself the night before. All blushes, Tom would hide himself away in his room, or in the library bathroom, responding with barely stifled giggles.

It wasn't hard for him to keep quiet about Chris. Even though he was bursting with excitement at having a boyfriend—because that's what Chris was to him—he also wanted to keep him his own secret for as long as he could. Not that he was ashamed of him. Tom could walk around town kissing Chris all day long if he thought he'd get away with it. But it seemed that everywhere he looked around town, especially once he returned to school in the fall, there was some kind of juvenile drama taking place, and here he was, shy and quiet Tom, often bullied and targeted for pranks, getting fucked and bred by a thirty-year-old ex-con. He felt set apart from the rest of his classmates, privileged and special in a way he'd never felt before. He didn't need any kind of validation from them, these high-schoolers with their Prom and their yearbooks and their college applications. He had Chris's approval and that's all that mattered to him.

Jeff was apparently excused from work while he recuperated from his 'mugging' because he was home every single day, prowling from room to room with his broken arm and nose and shattered ego. Tom could feel him staring after him whenever Tom went for water or food in the kitchen, or when he showered before bed. Unlike his mother, Jeff's eyes lingered on the dark bite mark on Tom's neck, wordless in his wrath, seething at his inability to approach Tom as he once could before Chris entered their lives. Tom liked to imagine Jeff picturing Chris giving Tom that bite, arms wrapped around each other, Tom clinging to Chris as those bright, shining white teeth pierced his skin. He liked to imagine how furious he would be at the passionately struggling image of Tom and Chris in his mind, the gentle licks to the mark afterward, the soft murmurings, the tender and willing way Tom gave himself over to Chris, his alpha. It made Tom glow with satisfaction and pride, that Jeff was so lowered in all his hate. It was still alarming to Tom – and incredibly humiliating – that Jeff had fooled him into believing he was a real alpha. How could he have possibly fallen for such a brazen lie? But Tom couldn't have known, not when he had been exposed to the epitome of an alpha only after a solid year of abuse and manipulation from Jeff. Tom promised himself he would try to be more vigilant of a person's true character, and not fall for such falsehoods again.

Despite Jeff's insufferable presence, Tom walked taller all the same, the bite mark and the scent enough to shroud him in the feeling of safety provided by Chris's claim, confident in the gift of Chris's strength to protect him. He gave Jeff no satisfaction and paid him no mind, ignoring him for the most part and giddy for the next time he and Chris could see each other again.

Chris would pick Tom up Friday after he got out of work. Tom told his mother he was spending the weekend with Bobby, and he'd told Bobby he was spending the weekend with another cousin, so hopefully both stories played out with little incident. Jeff had been extremely quiet all week,

stonily eating dinner with them, refusing to look at Tom, disappearing into his room immediately after. This was just fine with Tom. The less he saw of him, the less chance Jeff would remember how much he hated Tom and try to hit him again, if he even had the guts to try such a thing anymore.

Tom was lacing up his sneakers when he heard the roar of a motorcycle from down the street. He jumped up and grabbed his overnight bag, filled with two pairs of jeans, a couple of shirts, underwear and socks, as well as his laptop, phone charger, and the paperback he was reading. In the small front pocket, he'd put his nail polishes, mascara and lip gloss, figuring it was safer to keep them at Chris's house than in his own room. Having all his favorite things close by gave him comfort, feeling that wherever he was with his bag of special belongings, then he could feel at home.

After checking around his room for anything he missed, Tom climbed out the window and jogged to the street. Chris took off his helmet and passed it to Tom, who put it on and jumped behind him. God, he'd missed that big warm body. His pillows just didn't compare to the solid mass that was Chris pressed up against him in bed.

Speeding down the dusty streets, heading further and further into the harsh desert, Tom let his head hang back and gazed at the sky through the darkened visor of his helmet. Here was the happiness he had so often wondered about staring after couples that stood locked together in the hallways at school, with their determined mouths and straying hands. He would have that now, he thought, squeezing Chris's waist.

Chris turned onto the long stretch of barren road that led to his house and pulled into his driveway. He parked the bike in the garage, chaining up the doors again after.

"You came prepared," he chuckled, wrapping Tom under his arm. Tom hitched his backpack higher on his shoulders.

"I did! I brought clothes and some other things."

"Did you bring underwear?"

They were passing the garden and Tom smiled up at him, confused. "Yes...Why?"

Chris shrugged, fishing out his keys. "Hm. No reason. Tampons, too?"

"No. I finished a few days ago. They're hidden in my room."

"Good. Either way, I bought some more yesterday and put them under my bathroom sink. Just in case, okay?"

Tom blushed and side-hugged him, walking clumsily along. "Thanks, Chris."

Tom had barely dumped his bag on the couch when Chris was spinning him and kissing him hard, tongue shoving in. They fell onto the sofa, scrabbling for purchase.

His hands worked on Tom's jeans, yanking them down.

"I slept—fuck, baby, lift your hips—with your panties under my pillow," he whispered, voice rough.

Tom whined as Chris's lips latched onto his collarbone. He sucked and bit at the bone, and Tom writhed, held still by big hands. Jeans and briefs stuffed down to his knees, Chris flipped him so he

was facedown over the arm of the couch, his ass exposed. Thick fingers slid over his pussy and Tom whined, rocking back.

“Hold still, baby.”

“Daddy, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. I saved up all my cum for you. Did you touch yourself while you were away?”

Tom shook his head, hands bunched up against his chest. “No, Daddy. It’s not the same as you.”

“Good, baby. That’s what I like to hear.”

With a hand splayed wide on Tom’s lower back, Chris guided himself to Tom’s soaked cunt and pushed in. Tom groaned, jolting forward on the thrust, his flesh bouncing, his small cry filling the warm room.

“Fuck,” Chris groaned, holding Tom’s hips. “It’s like you got tighter.”

It was a fast and rough fuck. Chris wrapped one arm around Tom’s neck and the other over his chest, arching his back and holding him steady for his cock. His inked skin looked especially wicked on Tom’s pale, unblemished flesh, his thin body nearly eclipsed by Chris behind him.

“Knot me, knot me. Please. Daddy. I want it. So big.”

“I will, baby, I will.”

Mouth at Tom’s ear, Chris breathed heavy, whispering sweet filth. Taking Tom’s jaw, he pulled his head to the side and stared down at the original bite mark.

“The bond is made, but this will fade soon.”

“No, Daddy,” Tom moaned, curls bobbing over his forehead. “I don’t want it to.”

“You want another, baby?”

Golden curls bounced as Tom nodded eagerly. He rocked back against Chris, their hips slapping together.

“Yeah. Just like that,” Chris murmured, staring down at where he disappeared into Tom. “Fuck yourself on me.” Tom continued eagerly, his small moans and their smacking flesh the only noise in the room.

His grip tightened on Tom’s jaw, his other hand straying low on his back, the tip of his finger glancing over Tom’s other hole, yet untouched. The skin was pink and furled tightly, a smooth glide under Chris’s drifting finger.

“Daddy?” Tom’s breath hitched, his hips slowing to a stop.

Chris swallowed, heart beating fast. “I’m just wondering if my little boy would ever like his Daddy to fuck him here.” He added the smallest pressure to Tom’s back entrance, curious.

Tom gasped and held still. Licking his lips, lashes trembling, he said so softly, “I think your little boy wants that very much, Daddy. B-but I’m nervous.”

“I know,” Chris said, falling forward and draping himself over Tom’s back. Their lips met in a

hurried kiss, sweet little sounds bubbling up Tom's throat. "We won't now. Maybe soon. When you're ready for sure."

"Kay, Daddy."

Chris resumed his quick pace, mouth on the old bite, pressing down with just enough pressure to redden the mark anew. Tom writhed and groaned his pleasure, begging his Daddy to make him come. Chris reached around Tom and took hold of his cock, tugging on it with firm strokes. Tom came with a scream, pussy clenching and cock bursting, his thin body wracked with spasms so violent Chris had to wrap him close. Eyes rolled up, Tom whimpered and went limp in Chris's arms, chest flushed with pink as Chris neared his own release.

And when he came, he filled him to the brim, balls pulsing with every spurt, lasting so long Chris felt faint from the feel of Tom's tight little cunt soaking it up. The base of his cock started to swell and Chris gently pressed Tom face forward on the armrest, shuddering through the knotting.

"Daddy," Tom breathed, lashes trembling. "Yes, yes, yes. There it is. Make it big. I want it big." His cheeks were red and he looked barely present, his own spent cock trapped between the armrest and his belly. His cheek was flushed sweetly on the sofa.

"Fuck," Chris exhaled as another pulse of pleasure throbbed through him, his knot finally formed. They would be stuck together for at least an hour, so he very carefully gathered Tom in his arms and sat back on his heels, letting gravity take his weight until he was lying on his back, Tom spread over the top of him. He tucked his face into Chris's neck and sighed. He looked feverish, but sated, cheeks pink and dotted with sweat. "There you are, my lovely boy," Chris murmured, eyes sharp on Tom's face; the parted lips, the high blush, the scrunched brow and trembling lashes. Half-awake and listening to his Daddy. "You're beautiful, Tom."

Slumped against him, Tom kissed his neck tenderly.

"Was my pussy good for you, Daddy?"

Chris groaned and pawed at his curls. "The best, babe. Just what I needed after my long week away from you. My angel."

Tom smiled sweetly, glowing under Chris's praise. He squeezed his inner muscles and licked his lips with a wicked grin when Chris groaned and tossed his head back.

"You'll kill me, princess. But what a way to die. Embedded in my little girl's cunt."

Tom laughed from deep in his chest, pink tongue poking out between his teeth. "I love when you say that!"

"My beautiful princess. Mine."

Dripping onto Chris, Tom slept while they waited, Chris humming a song in his hair. Once his knot started to shrink, Chris woke him up with kisses on the cheek. Tom lifted his hips and Chris slipped out, a flood of cum following after. On wobbly legs, Tom held Chris's hand and trailed after him into the bedroom, rubbing at his eyes with a closed fist.

They showered together in the tiny tub, slathering soapsuds over their bodies and globs of shampoo into their hair. They fell into bed after, naked.

"I have something for you," Chris said after a while, stroking Tom's hip.

Tom's eyes lit up. "What is it?"

"Close your eyes."

Tom did, sitting up patiently, grinning. Something was placed before him and then Chris's voice telling him he could look.

There was a pink and purple bag on the mattress, as well as a large white box.

"Daddy!" He sat up on his knees, his nakedness drawing Chris's eyes. "Which do I open first?"

Chris sat on the edge of the bed. "You pick."

With a flirty head tilt, Tom reached for the white box and flipped open the lid.

Inside were two pairs of shoes—black and grey high top sneakers and a pair of black boots that laced up to mid-shin.

He gaped at them, picking up one pair, and then the other.

Chris nodded. "I checked the size of your sneakers when you were showering last weekend. And, I think both of these will look fucking hot on you with those tight jeans you always wear."

Tom licked his lips. "For me to ride with, Daddy?"

"Yeah. You can use both on the bike with me. You'll need to break them in, though."

He cradled the shoes to his chest and then placed them back in their box, carefully arranging the tissue paper over them again. He jumped forward and hugged Chris around the neck, immensely pleased when he drew back to see Chris's red cheeks.

"Go on and open the bag," he said gruffly.

Removing pink tissue paper, Tom brought out five pairs of lace panties. Some had satin designs on them, but all were so beautiful and delicate and just for him.

"Oh my god," he breathed, fingering each pair.

"Do you like them?"

In answer, Tom bounded off the bed and pulled on the white lace, feeling it hug his cock snugly, riding up on his bottom, letting his cheeks poke out.

"Jesus," Chris murmured, reaching to touch Tom's thigh. "You were made to wear those."

Tom beamed and fell back on the bed, rooting around inside the bag. He discovered a roller-ball perfume that he sniffed and immediately rubbed over his neck, followed lastly by a shirt. On the front was a black and white American flag facing down from collar to hem. The collar was a low-cut V design, so it would hang to the middle of Tom's chest, which he felt secretly thrilled about. The back was all black lace. It was a shirt designed for women, obviously, but Tom became possessive of it immediately. He slipped into it and stood for Chris.

It was only slightly loose, hugging his straight waist and flat belly. With the panties and the shirt, he blushed as he spun for Chris, feeling enormously attractive and actually *seen*.

"Thank you so much, Chris. No one's ever bought me anything like this...I love everything." He

carefully removed both the panties and the shirt, folding them gently and putting everything in the corner with his backpack.

“Good. I’m happy you do. When I saw them at the store, I couldn’t get the image of you wearing them out of my mind.”

Tom plopped down beside Chris and hooked an arm around his neck, lips at his brow. “Was my Daddy thinking naughty thoughts?”

A hand glided up his back, tickling his bare skin. “Such bad, bad thoughts. I imagined my princess doing all sorts of things for me.” With a wicked squint, he lunged forward and tackled Tom to the bed, growling playfully at his neck and nipping with his teeth.

Tom laughed, deep-throated, pulling Chris up to the pillows. He squirmed and clutched at him, both breathless once their tickle fight was over. “Let’s sleep, Daddy,” Tom panted, carding his fingers through Chris’s buzzed hair, scratching lightly. Chris shivered and pressed himself closer. “And then you can tell me all about these naughty things.”

Head tucked into Tom’s neck, Chris was happy to oblige. Eventually, they both dozed, the late afternoon light filtering in around the blanketed window, dust motes swirling. After some time, Tom blinked awake and yawned. Chris had shifted during their nap and was lying over him, heavy and asleep.

Tom tried taking a deep breath, but his chest felt too constricted with the weight.

“Daddy,” he wheezed, pushing halfheartedly at Chris’s chest. Chris groaned.

A deep rumbling came from the street outside and Tom froze, head cocked to listen. When the noise became louder, Chris jerked awake.

“I think someone’s here, Daddy,” Tom whispered.

Chris peered down at him and then glanced around the room with one eye open.

“Fuck, it’s the guys.”

Tom frowned. “Guys?”

Chris climbed off of him and shrugged into his jeans. Tom wrapped the sheet around himself.

“From the group I ride with.” He slipped on a shirt. “They’ll only be here a little while, babe. You can sleep some more if you want to.”

Tom nodded and leaned up as Chris bent to kiss him. He closed the door quietly behind himself and went to greet his friends. Tom fell back against the pillows and curled onto his side, his pussy delightfully sore. He must have slept because when he woke to the feel of a finger trailing over his arm, the light was different in the room—early evening, maybe—and there was someone standing over him.

“Mm, Daddy,” he mumbled, not fully conscious.

“Sure, if you’d like,” said the voice, higher than Chris’s, and much older.

Tom’s eyes snapped open and he gasped, scrambling up and crowding against the headboard, sheet clutched tight over his chest.

A man stood beside the bed, tall and old enough to be Tom's father. Skin like worn leather and sporting a grey goatee, the man held unnervingly still, hands open at his sides, blue eyes like crystal as they stared at Tom.

"Who are you?" Tom asked, finally finding his voice.

"Your...daddy?" the man answered, and then bent double, cackling loudly. "Boy, you look like a tiny little lamb, all frightened of the slaughter. Christ," he said, sniffing at the air. "You smell real good." Those eyes flicked down Tom's form, and Tom inched back, terrified.

Pulse quickening at his throat, Tom gulped, eyes darting over the room. Chris. Where was Chris?

"I'm Mick," the man said. "And you are?"

Tom kept quiet, the name clicking in his memory. This was the man whose orders Chris had obeyed, the orders that got him thrown in jail for six years. This was the leader of their motorcycle crew. Mick took a step closer and Tom shuffled back a foot, sheet clutched in trembling hands. He was naked and there was nowhere to go.

Mick threw his hands up, no threat intended. "You don't have to be scared. You're a fresh pup, I can tell."

"I belong to Chris," Tom whispered, dropping his eyes immediately. This man was an alpha. He knew it instantly. His every instinct to obey was going haywire, intimidation working to make him cower against the headboard.

Mick laughed. "Oh, yes. I can tell you're Chris's. He's knotted and bitten you. That's plain for all to see. But listen—." Another step, and Tom whimpered, retreating another foot. He would run out of bed any moment. Mick put a knee on the mattress and Tom sat straight up. "Don't be afraid. Just—wait a minute, boy. What are you—now hang on." Mick reached forward just as Tom tried to jump to the side. He caught a wrist and hauled him close, spinning Tom so that he was face down on the pillow. Tom screamed, feeling the sheet slip low on his back. He snapped his legs closed, afraid Mick would see his vagina.

"Chris!" But his cry was swallowed by the pillow. Frantic, he waved his arms, trying to dislodge Mick from above him. He yelped in shock when he felt teeth at the back of his neck. "Stop!" he shrieked. "Get off me! You're hurting me!"

Mick clamped down and Tom felt a flame of anger snap up his spine. Bunching his arm close to his chest, he snapped it back, his elbow cracking Mick on the forehead. The older man grunted and tottered to the side, and Tom took the chance to scramble out from under him. The sheet was tangled around his waist and he snatched it up, tripping over himself and falling to the floor. Crawling backwards, he collided with the wall and curled himself there, breathing hard.

"You got some fight in you, boy," Mick laughed, rubbing his forehead.

Heart in his throat, it galloped a wild beat, but he sat frozen watching Mick, thinking of where to escape.

But then footsteps pounded in the hallway and the door burst open.

Chris stood there with one hand on the doorknob, eyes wide on Tom huddled on the floor before flicking over to Mick standing by the rumpled bed.

Mick's laughter faded into an amused chuckle. "Now, don't get your shorts in a twist. Just wait a

minute, Christopher. I was only trying to gentle him.”

Chris was staring at Mick like he might at any second snap his spine in two. Nostrils flared, hands fisted, Tom could see that Chris was angry, and he more than knew what Chris was capable of.

Chris’s voice was low with warning. “You did what?”

“Chris,” Tom whispered, and Chris snapped his gaze over to where Tom sat on the floor. He softened immediately and turned on his heel toward him. Tom reached his arms up as Chris dropped to his knees. He wrapped Tom against his chest, pulling the sheet further up his shoulders. His eyes were back on Mick, narrowed with anger.

Mick looked unconcerned. He gestured to Tom, eyebrows raised, and said, “He was panicked.” Like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Tom whipped his head around. “I was only panicked because you were leaning over me when I woke up. Touching my arm.” He hiccupped and hid his face in Chris’s neck again, hugging him tight around the waist. Chris’s hand on his head was soothing, helping to calm his nerves.

“Look, I was only in here because I needed to piss. One in the hall is stuffed with something.” Mick shrugged and headed to the master bathroom. “The boy was upset, so I tried gentling.”

“Gentling only works when it’s the omega’s alpha.” Chris looked up at Mick, brows low. “I’m his alpha, Mick.”

“I know. I could tell. Your bite is impressive.” He smiled. “Little pups in distress melt my heart, alright? I just wanted him to be okay.”

Tom sniffed and pressed his cheek to Chris’s face. “Daddy,” he whispered.

“It’s alright, baby,” Chris whispered back, holding the sheet closed over Tom’s body.

“Don’t worry. He clocked me right in the face. Now let me piss already. Christ.” Mick disappeared into the bathroom and Chris turned to Tom.

“Daddy, he scared me. I thought he was you. I tried to yell, to fight him off. He’s strong, Daddy.”

“Shh, there now. You’re okay? You’re unhurt?” He felt along the back of Tom’s neck, where Mick had bitten him, four tooth lines over his pale skin, red and jagged where Tom had shaken him off. He shook his head and cursed.

Heart pounding, Tom nodded. “I’m okay. But he bit me!”

“Shh. Don’t cry, princess. I’m here now.” He rocked Tom against him, eyes on the bathroom door. “He knew it wouldn’t work. I don’t know why he tried it. Or maybe,” he said, meeting Tom’s eyes. “I know exactly why he did.”

Tom said nothing, hands in Chris’s hair. They spoke so quietly, there in the corner, their whispers like feathers on their faces.

“I heard him pull up. But when he didn’t show out back, I came to see if everything was alright.”

More tears welled in Tom’s eyes. “Thank goodness you did, Daddy.” He jumped forward and hugged Chris’s neck tightly.

The toilet flushed and then Mick was opening the door. “Sorry about all the trouble. Certainly

wasn't expecting someone to be here. Quite the looker, ain't he?"

Chris's jaw clenched, holding Tom tighter to him, refusing to answer.

Mick crossed the room and lingered at the door. "Bring the boy to the bonfire next week, Christopher. He'll enjoy it." He smiled, nodding at Tom, and then walked out of the room, his whistling fading down the hall.

Chris and Tom looked at each other.

It wasn't a suggestion. It was an order.

Little Bird

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

Tom stayed in Chris's room for a while longer after Chris went out back again. In the backyard, he could hear men laughing and talking loudly but couldn't make anything out. He took a slow shower, wanting to be rid of every trace of his encounter with Mick. Afterward, he rubbed lotion over his limbs and then rolled a bit of the perfume Chris had given him to his collarbones and behind his ears. Feeling much better, he sat curled up in bed watching a documentary about the ant kingdom. His hand kept straying to the back of his neck, fighting off the chills of remembering Mick's teeth there.

"What's gentling?" he'd asked Chris before he went outside to join his friends.

"It's when an alpha bites the back of his omega's neck. It calms the omega, who is usually in distress or panicked in some way. It releases all kinds of shit into the bloodstream. Dopamine and serotonin or something, that relaxes the omega and eases him into a state of mind that is better and less harmful to him. It's all scientific shit that I never understood."

"But it only works if you do it to me?"

"Yeah, baby. Have you ever seen lions carry their cubs by the nape of their neck? It's kind of the same thing. It calms them."

Tom sniffed and rested his head on Chris's broad shoulder. "I would like it if you did that to me. But not him. He really scared me."

Chris rubbed his back, pressing his cheek where Mick had bitten him, already working to rid him of the other man's scent. "I'm sorry he did, Tom. I never expected him to come into the house. He usually doesn't. I think he might have smelled you from outside. It's the only reason I can think of that he wouldn't piss out in the garden."

His scowl drew his thick brows low, and Tom traced a finger down his nose, letting his thumb trace over his lips. This was troubling him more than Tom originally thought.

"But I'm yours, Daddy. He can't touch me, right?"

"There are unspoken rules among Alphas, Tom. Claims are sacred. Claims are immediately recognizable, just like hair color or what clothes you're wearing. There's no way to really hide them. Mick knew that you were mine. But he still tried something like gentling you, which is one of the most intimate things that occur between alphas and omegas. It's a part of our bond. It's something biological that only happens between people who are mated. You will respond only to my gentling because you're mine and I'm yours. He knows this." He shook his head. "I'm fucking furious that he tried it."

"Please don't be mad, Daddy. I don't want you upset."

"I won't show it. Not to them. Not to the crew. But I won't forget this. I'm already on edge about

the attention you draw from other men. Even right after we met, I worried about you. You don't realize it, but people stare after you, Tom. And another alpha would recognize you were different. Just like I did."

Tom shifted, uneasy with this knowledge about himself. He had never seen himself as a sexually attractive person. He was gangly and still growing, with pointy elbows and knobby knees, with long exposed collarbones and a sprinkling of freckles on his shoulders. The gap in his teeth was slowly closing, but still visible; his curls were unruly; his chest was thin, his laugh was wheezy, he mumbled in his sleep, he—.

"You're so beautiful, Tom," Chris said quietly, looking down at their joined hands. "I saw you that day at the prison and I couldn't move for a moment. You were sitting there, body twisted in the chair to look at me, and the sun was shining through the window and your hair was all lit up, and your eyes were so round, expectant, mouth open into this tiny 'o'. I felt on fire, standing there, with you waiting for me."

Tears shimmered in Tom's vision, and he blinked fast. "That was one of the best days of my life, Daddy. Meeting you. All of my hopes confirmed. I couldn't stop thinking about you."

They reached for each other at the same time, hugging hard, Tom whispering his affection.

"Can you imagine," Tom said quietly. "If I'd been on my period. He said I smelled good. He would have known."

Breathing out a sigh through his nose, Chris hooked an arm around Tom's neck and dragged him into a hard hug. "People will find out eventually. When I get you big with my baby." Tom smiled and hid his face in Chris's armpit. "Other male omegas have existed that are like you, with girl parts. It's a rare thing, but they're highly coveted. Treasured. They're known as Duals."

Tom gave a small little gasp, burrowing further into Chris's armpit.

"You've heard of them?"

Silent, Tom nodded.

Chris chuckled. "Uncommon, princess. Like a siren. Or wood nymph."

Tom peeked up at him, eyes flashing with mirth. "A sprite. Or a fairy."

Kissing his crown of curls, Chris rocked him in place. "My fairy. My nymph. So beautiful. I don't deserve you."

"I get to say who does or doesn't deserve me, Daddy." Tom stood on his tiptoes and wrapped both arms around that wide, strong neck, and smiled. "And I say you do. More than anyone."

Sliding his lips over Chris's stubbly cheek, he found the matching pair and kissed him. Chris grabbed him up tight, Tom's toes skimming the floor.

"Will you be okay, babe? While I go back outside?"

"Yes, Daddy. I'll wait in here for you."

Chris glanced at the door. "The damn knob doesn't have a lock. I never needed one. But I'll install one tomorrow, so that you feel safer."

And after his shower, dressed in an old shirt of Chris's that he pulled from a hanger in the closet, Tom did feel safer. He cuddled around a pillow and flipped through the channels, finally settling on a cooking show about fancy cupcakes.

A thunder of roaring engines sounded suddenly from outside and he jumped up, tiptoeing down the hall to the front window in the living room.

Chris was standing at the start of his dirt road as about twenty motorcycles charged past him and into the shimmering desert. The sun was bright and dusty, the winds swirling around Chris as he started back up toward the house, taking a long drag from his cigarette. He saw Tom at the window and paused, blowing the white smoke out through the side of his mouth. He smiled, and Tom remembered how Chris had looked just after beating Jeff, not a speck of blood on him, the man lying wrecked at his feet and the crunch of bone still a sharp echo on wind.

Tom put his hand against the windowpane, and smiled back.

**

After the guys left, they jumped on his bike and rode over to the restaurant by the mechanic shop where Chris was working. The evening was cool, darker clouds kicking in from the east, a breeze ruffling Tom's curls as they walked through the front entrance. Mexican music flowed out of the speakers anchored to the ceiling corners as the cooks and servers shouted out to each other in Spanish. Hand in hand, they ordered their meal at the counter of steak burritos and chips, and then sat in a corner booth. Sodas uncapped and fizzing, Tom turned in the seat with a knee bent up, listening as Chris told him a story from when he was in high school – "I flew around the corner, right, and it wasn't my fault the girls' locker room wasn't locked!" Tom laughed sweetly as the soda bubbled up his nose, trying to breathe through the burn and the hiccups. Sitting beside him, Chris watched as Tom's eyes scrunched up, his cheeks red, giggling as he cupped a hand before his mouth to catch the dripping liquid. He couldn't take his eyes off him. He was radiant in his happiness, something he felt Tom had been hesitant to show before in his life, as if someone would see it and march up to snatch it away, demanding to know where he got off thinking he deserved such a thing.

But he does deserve it, Chris thought, wiping a stray drop with his thumb. He deserves everything good in this world.

Tom, rosy cheeked, lashes cast low, smiled and held his wrist while they waited for their food. The man who brought out their dinner shook Chris's hand and asked them how they were doing. Tom nodded shyly and returned his smile, liking the kind spark in the man's brown eyes. Once he left, Chris explained that he knew the guys who ran the place, brothers by the name of Román and Adán. They had all gone to high school together, and were good men Chris had known for years. They were vocal about support for alpha and omega relationships, which some people were adamantly, fiercely, opposed to. Not that Chris cared. When faced with him in person, very few people had very much to say.

"I don't blame them," Tom said, pecking at Chris's plate. "My Daddy is a big man." He scrunched his nose in an affectionate air kiss and took a big bite of his own burrito.

Glancing around, Chris saw there was a lull in foot traffic.

"I gotta take a piss, babe. You okay for a minute?"

"Mmhmm," Tom breathed, sipping his soda. Chris gave his thigh a squeeze and then slid from the booth. A minute later, he washed his hands and stepped out into the hall, where he bumped into

Román. They gave each other a fond hug.

“Chris, it’s great to see you, bro.”

“Thanks, Rome. It’s good to be out.”

“Six years, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit. No way, man. Not for me. When my primo Antonio got locked up, my moms told me and Adán that we would never end up in a place like that. She kept us in line.”

Chris laughed. “Wish she could have adopted me.”

“Shit, man. Gringo like you would have attracted plenty of attention in my neighborhood.” He clapped Chris on the shoulder with a laugh. “Hey, word on the street is you’re bonded.”

“Yeah? Where’d you hear that?”

“A little bird,” Román smiled. “That him out there? Your little bird?”

Chris glanced out into the dining room where Tom was playing a game on his phone, tongue poking out as he concentrated.

Chris smiled, crossing his arms. “Yeah, that’s him. My little bird.”

“Damn! How old is he?”

Chris knocked him on the shoulder. “Old enough,” he lied.

“Nah, you know me and Adán ain’t ratting on nobody. You and him are good, I’m good, too.”

“Thanks, man,” Chris said, shaking his hand. “But he looks younger than he actually is.”

Román winked at him. “He’s a looker, man. Think you can handle him?”

Chris chuckled. “Been doing alright so far.”

“Bet he draws lots of attention.” Román’s eyes flicked over to the entrance, where two men entered. Both immediately turned to the corner where Tom sat. “Check it, check it.” He gestured with his chin. Chris turned to see both alphas ignore the front counter and make a beeline for Tom. He sat unaware, cheeks hollowed out around his straw, eyes glued to the screen of his phone. Chris was already moving forward, but Román grabbed his arm.

“Let’s see what happens, Chris.” Angry, Chris snapped his gaze back to him, and Román hurried to explain. “Look, you’re bonded. Should be nothing. They won’t get near him. I bet you.”

Not until the men were within five feet of him did Tom finally take notice of them. He sat up hurriedly, straw slipping free of his lips, phone gripped tightly in both hands. Eyes wide, he stared at the men, who came to a slow stop before him. The taller man took a sniff at the air, eyes landing on the still visible bite mark on Tom’s neck. And very slowly, both men turned to look at where Chris stood in the short hallway to the bathrooms, Román standing with his arms crossed just behind him, his back up. There was a tense moment when no one moved, and then the first man gave a short nod and turned away from Tom, followed by his friend. They left the restaurant and disappeared into the dark outside.

“Great. Lost two customers because of your boyfriend.” Román patted his shoulder good-naturedly, and Chris finally took a deep, steadying breath. He’d been about to charge across the restaurant to make sure those men didn’t touch Tom. Their run-in with Mick in his bedroom had set him out of sorts, doubting things that should always make complete sense, like bonds between alphas and omegas and the respect and observance other alphas had toward such mated couples.

“I better go to him,” he whispered, and excused himself from Román.

“Hey, tell your boy that whenever he needs a bite or a cold soda, to come on in and it’s on the house.”

Chris shook his hand again. “That’s decent of you, Rome. Thank you.”

Tom had that nervous flit about him when Chris returned to the booth. He immediately squeezed in under his arm.

“They knew, didn’t they, Daddy? They knew I was yours?”

“Yes, babe. That’s exactly how bonds work,” Chris said, tossing an arm over Tom’s shoulders. His eyes narrowed on the dark windows, seeing nothing. “How they should always work, when you know what matters to a man the most.”

**

Back on the bike, Chris turned west on the interstate. The night air was cool on the highway, and Tom bundled himself against his back, keeping his head up so his helmet wouldn’t bump Chris’s shoulder. But once they exited, the winds calmed down and the temperature became comfortable again. He felt Tom bounce in excitement when he saw where they were headed. The Desert Sun Swap Meet was open late on weekends, and it was only now starting to get a little more exciting than during their day hours. In one corner stood a tall carousel with its flaking prancing unicorns and goats and dragons, shining eye balls rolling with every revolution. There was a petting zoo and a small arena where timid ponies carrying squirming toddlers walked in lazy circles. A tangled section in the center was the food area, smelling of burnt sugar and sizzling grease. And all throughout were aisles upon aisles of stalls where people sold all manner of stuff: old mechanical gear, fashionable clothing and shoes, electronics and protection gadgets, makeup and perfumes and blankets and children’s toys and candy and native artwork and sunglasses and baseball caps and workout gear and outdoorsy stuff.

Chris parked at the edge of a cluster of other motorcycles, Tom climbing off and placing his helmet on the seat. His eyes were wide on the swap meet entrance.

“Never been?” Chris took his hand, starting a slow walk, Tom following.

“Only during the day once, with my friend Bobby. We came because his phone charger had busted on the bus ride home.” They crossed in and he looked around in awe. “It looked nothing like this.”

Chris pulled him into the passing crowd, spreading an arm over his shoulders and tucking him against his side. “I liked to come here before I was locked up. But, I’m an old man. These things entertain me.”

Tom grinned up at him. “You’re my old man.” He stood on his tiptoes and whispered in Chris’s ear. “I love you, old man.”

Chris paused in his walk, tugging Tom under a green awning. “You love me?”

Flushed, Tom blinked up at him, and nodded. "I can feel it. Just in here." He touched his chest. "Can't you?"

Chris swallowed past the lump in his throat, arm hooked around Tom's pale neck, Tom's hands curled in his shirt. "Yeah, babe," he said, a bit roughly. "Yeah, I feel it." *I've felt it since that first day at the prison.*

Smiling wide, Tom crushed him in a tight hug and then pulled Chris toward the carousel. They had a spin on it, Tom astride the dragon, rising and falling, rising and falling, Chris keeping a nervous hand on the small of his back, eyes squinting up at the gold spray-painted pole that pistoned in and out of the creaking ceiling. And after, they fell in line at one of the food trucks, Chris buying Tom a bag of kettle corn and a sugar-frosted funnel cake, topped with a wallop of strawberries. He got a small bag of sunflower seeds for himself. They sat at one of the tables, the umbrella rocking gently as the wind picked up. Tom ate his treats and then wiped a napkin over his face, but Chris reached over and rubbed a bit of white powder from his cheekbone.

"Mm! Daddy, can we go there right now?"

He pointed at a stall lit with fluorescent light and spewing some kind of poppy song. Chris could see a layout of makeup and perfumes in the front, the interior walls lined with what looked like stickers and phone cases.

"Yeah, babe. Let's go." Tom went ahead, Chris walking up a little slower, the bag of seeds in his hand. He spit out the husks, glancing over the items up front.

"Wanna see anything?" the girl behind the table said.

"I'm with him," Chris said, pointing to Tom, who was inside the tent, looking at the wall of stickers. "I'll see what he sees." She grunted and returned to her phone. Tom was talking to a man who seemed to be helping him.

"Can I see that one, please?"

The man reached a metal claw to the highest row of stickers and brought down the one Tom had indicated. It was a pink bow, glittered and slightly bigger than Chris's hand.

"What did you find?"

Tom held the sticker in both hands, smoothing his fingers over the knot of it. "It's so pretty."

"I'll get it for you." Tom gasped up at him. Chris nodded. "Anything you want, babe."

They left the stall with the pink sticker, two lip glosses, a pair of red and pink heart-shaped sunglasses, and a purple phone case. Tom clutched the bag of gifts in his arms, hips bumping as he walked under Chris's arm.

"Thank you, Daddy. I'm so excited!"

"What's the sticker for?"

"I was thinking for my helmet?"

"We'll put it on back home."

Tom hummed and leaned against him lazily, whispering, "Home," with a small smile.

They made a giant circle around the bulk of the stalls, stopping to see the ponies, checking an array of power tools, walking through the low-hanging display of metal sunflower garden decorations. They were passing a brightly lit corner booth when Tom gasped and slowed to a stop, Chris busy watching a demonstration of a car engine disassembly.

Blinking up at the tent, Tom soaked in every detail of the lingerie on display. He remembered their names from that Victoria's Secret catalog he'd swiped from his neighbor's mailbox, bras and panties of every color, pink and purple and yellow and blue bustiers and corsets, lace and silk teddies, babydolls and slips, garters and belts and sheer gowns and bikinis and thongs.

He swallowed past a bout of dry mouth. There was one in particular that caught his attention, a garter belt bra and thong package, all lace and black straps. He suddenly envisioned himself in it, Chris watching him wear it. He would need to find some stockings, but maybe if—

“You ready to go, babe?”

Tom snapped to attention, whirling around and taking Chris's elbow. “Yes, I'm ready.”

The night air was crisp on the drive home, cicadas buzzing in the black-washed landscape of the surrounding desert. In his garage, Chris wiped down the helmet and then very carefully peeled off the decal sticker from its protective back. Tom hovered at his shoulder, pointing to where he wanted it. Once stuck on, Chris wiped a moist cloth over the pink bow, smoothing out the bubbles so that it lay flawlessly on the surface. He handed it to Tom, who shoved it down on his head, turning to the side so that the bow was presented brightly.

“Looks good,” Chris smiled, lifting the visor to see Tom's eyes. They were crinkled with happiness.

“Thank you, Chris,” he said, voice muffled.

“You're welcome, babe.”

They left the bike and the helmet in the garage, and Chris chained up the doors. After showering and brushing their teeth, Tom fell asleep nestled warmly against him, the TV's blue ghost light flickering over them. But Chris stayed awake, running small circles on Tom's shoulder with his thumb, the other hand cupped protectively over the back of his neck, willing the red scratch marks from Mick's teeth to go away. Even now a bubble of flame threatened to bloom over his vision.

Fucking Mick.

He, of all people, should know better. Their leader. Unbelievable.

Chris wasn't about to fall for his half-assed line about needing to piss, or being all choked up over a distressed pup like Tom. The whole situation had him on edge. As one alpha to another, Mick knew just how to placate Chris, using nonchalance to avoid him exploding. And Chris had been on the verge, the sight of Tom on the floor with that thin sheet the only thing protecting his modesty, Mick's scent strong on him. Chris almost jumped him that moment.

But then Tom's small voice, whispering for him, and the only steps Chris could take were toward him, kneeling down, holding him tightly. He'd been shaking, panicked heart fluttering at his throat. He never wanted Tom so afraid, and so angry. He'd been startled to find Mick above him, and once safe in Chris's arms a dignified fury swam in the undercurrent of his words.

Chris was proud of him. For defending himself. For speaking out against Mick.

Mick should learn early enough that Tom would try his damndest to fight off an unwanted touch.

Tom shifted against him, his soft mouth pursing as he mumbled something in his sleep.

"I'm here, baby," Chris whispered. He flicked off the TV and settled down on the pillows more comfortably. Tom half-woke, sitting up and blinking around owlishly. But Chris just chuckled and dragged him back down again.

Sunday was a lazy day of sex and sleeping in. Worn out, blissfully bleary, Tom lounged back on the bed flipping through the channels and laughing when Chris tossed him gently on his back, spreading his legs and dipping low between them.

Tom would arch and moan, pinching his nipples and grabbing Chris's hair, grinding against his face and coming with a shout. And then Chris would bury himself deep, hips snapping hard, Tom's inner walls giving smoothly around his thickness.

"What does princess want?"

"You, Daddy," Tom breathed, legs collapsed to the sides, elbows tucked under him on the bed. The smooth creases of his groin were gouged deep from the angle Chris held his legs, but he looked up at Chris, eyes heavy with want, delicate neck bobbing with every thrust. "Your cum. Your kisses. All of you."

Coming inside him was the simplest, loveliest delight of his life, the head swelling and bursting, his seed spitting thickly, bubbling out. And Tom, the naughty, filthy kitten he was, would reach between them and dip his fingers into the spilling cream, sucking them in his mouth, moaning as he blinked up at Chris. Because Tom, in his short sixteen years, had never experienced something as painfully erotic as touch, as the hurricane gush of bodily fluids, or a kiss as a ribbon snaps deep inside you and you begin your ascent.

There was always some part of him touching some part of Chris, testing the texture, the give and bend of a limb, the scent in the crook of nimble and secret places. Knotting was his favorite. He loved being stuck to Chris, lying face to face, whispering and sharing things about themselves. It was only them and their flesh and their words, breaths on a face, fingers in hair, lips pressed hurriedly in between.

"My rut will come soon."

"When, Daddy?"

"Soon. I don't know. I'm starting to feel something. Maybe a couple of weeks."

"After the bonfire."

"Yes. I think so."

Tom was quiet, and then, "You'll need me?"

"Every day, Tom. Every minute. I won't be able to be without you."

Tom half-turned onto his side, wincing when Chris's knot pulled tight. He took his head in both hands. "I'll be here for you. Always."

"It might be sudden, babe. You might be in the kitchen getting some water and I'll storm in and bend you over."

“You say that like I don’t want that either.” Tom rolled his eyes, squeezing Chris’s earlobe.

“I just don’t want you to be scared. Of me. When it happens.” He blinked and looked down, not wanting to catch any looks on Tom’s face that he would wish to forget. “I might be aggressive. I might not respond if you speak to me. I might just take you for myself.”

Tom took his chin and forced Chris to meet his eyes.

“I think it’s important to understand, Daddy, that I feel this enormous emotion right here for you. It started right after we met. It became cemented in me right after we mated. I feel...*whole* when I’m with you, and I ache when I’m not. I’m not sure if it’s the same with you—.”

“It is,” Chris cut in roughly, ice blue eyes on the pink bow of Tom’s mouth.

Tom smiled. “I want you to be okay. I want you to be healthy and safe and unhurt. I don’t want you to thirst or be hungry. In any capacity of those words. And when you’re in your ruts, my place is beside you. Because I will want to be there. Helping you. Feeling all the pleasure you can give me. Feeling all the pleasure I give you. You wanting me has allowed me to be the freest, like I could fly.”

“I do more than just want you, Tom.” Chris shifted closer, his knot throbbing. They both squeezed their eyes closed, panting a beat, opening them again and smiling. “I love you, too. You told me last night and I was frozen in all my happiness, in all my disbelief. That this flower, *you*, could love someone like me.”

“But you’re all I ever wanted,” Tom said softly. His brows puckered. “You protect me and keep me safe, you keep me happy and healthy. I know it’s only been a short time, but I trust you. I trust you with my life, for the rest of my life. Okay?”

Chris exhaled, relief thrumming through him. “Okay, babe.”

With throaty giggles and murmurs, they finished for the third time, wilting to the bed in a tumble of sweat and sighs, wrapping limbs like a pretzel to rest.

Nicotine and Salt

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

A week later and they were back in Chris's house. Tom was freshly bruised with a bite mark on his inner thigh, the one on his neck regretfully faded and almost gone.

"Are you sure about this babe?"

"Yes. In fact," he said, scooping his new shirt and a pair of panties from his backpack. "I think I'll wear these to the bonfire."

Chris looked down and took a deep breath. "Babe, you don't have to go if you don't want to. Mick thinks he can dictate things in our personal life and honestly, if it's not crew business, then I don't fucking care."

Tom sat down beside him. "Will you be with me?"

"Every minute."

He shrugged. "Then I don't care, either. I'll go. I mean, he did frighten me last week, and *bit me*. But I felt so much better as soon as you were in the room. I knew he couldn't hurt me, then. And he looked like he wanted to. Hurt me. Besides the biting. He looked at me the way Jeff sometimes does. But I'm still mad about it. Because I'm yours. And maybe he should be reminded of that." He crossed his arms and stared determinedly across at Chris, who chuckled and kissed his cheek.

"You're absolutely right. I won't leave your side," he said, wrapping him under his arm. "And I think you'll have fun. The fire gets so big. And there's music and drinking."

"When does it start?"

"Late tonight. So maybe we should nap before, yeah? Don't want my kitten getting sleepy before midnight."

Tom poked his belly. "More like don't want my old man getting sleepy before midnight."

Chris grabbed him and tickled his ribs. "Old man, huh? I'm your old man?"

Tom burst out in giggles and bucked, squirming to get away. "Yes! You're *my* old man!"

Chris pushed him back on the bed and pulled his panties to the side, devouring him with kisses and filthy whispers and a good amount of love bites, sighs and breaths like flowers on their skin.

They did nap, Tom waking up later in the day to Chris already inside him. He fucked him face down on the bed, hand curling into his hair, tugging with every thrust. Tom gushed with a delighted little laugh, his pussy pulsing around Chris, who bent low to lick at the back of Tom's neck.

He still wasn't satisfied that Mick's scent was off Tom, and he wanted to make sure everyone at the bonfire knew to whom Tom belonged.

After limping into the shower, Tom took his time washing himself, scrubbing at his scalp and under his arms, between his legs and down to his lower back and plump cheeks. He shaved again and smacked his jaw with soothing lotion, passing the bathroom to Chris, who sniffed at him on the way in, grunting his approval.

And while Chris showered, Tom fiddled some more with his phone. He clicked on the camera app, his screen zooming into focus on the front wall. Looking at the closed bathroom door, a smile tugged on his face as he thought of something.

When he slipped into the bathroom a minute later, steam rose high on the ceiling, the mirror fogged and sweating with it. He could hear Chris moving around behind the shower curtain and he approached it quietly, phone in one hand. Slowly, he pulled the curtain to the side and there was Chris, soaping his face, big bubbly suds streaming down his chest and belly, gathering around the root of his cock and spilling further along his legs.

Tom's mouth fell open, still amazed at his big body, the muscles and the tattoos, made more menacing somehow with the soap thinly obscuring most of them. Chris wiped his face and peered at Tom in surprise. Tom aimed the camera and took a picture, capturing Chris from the neck down.

"I'm keeping that forever," he grinned, saving it into an album.

Chris smiled crookedly at him, rinsing off the rest of the soap. "You can take more if you like."

"Actually," Tom said, putting his phone down on the sink counter. He eyed Chris's cock, filling slowly with interest. Thick veins stood out clearly, and Tom suddenly wanted to feel the rise and bump of them on his tongue. "I want to suck you." He said it breathlessly, fingers curling into loose fists. Taking a step forward, he started tugging off the only thing he wore, a pair of loose boxers.

"Suck me?"

"Yeah," Tom said, stepping into the stall and dropping to his knees on the wet tiles. Chris blocked most of the shower spray from hitting him directly, but a light mist still landed on his face, clinging to his lashes as he looked up at Chris. Images of some of the things he'd seen guys do to other guys online flooded Tom's head, but face to face with Chris's cock had his mouth watering and he knew abruptly, somewhat on instinct, what to do.

Leaning forward, he nosed along his sac, hanging heavy and covered in a fuzz of blond hairs. And then he licked a stripe down the curve, letting the tip of his tongue curl under his balls and sucked one into his mouth. Above him, Chris groaned, a hand splayed on the wall for balance. Water dripped off his nose and jawline, a swimming outline for his handsome face, hair hanging in sharp shreds.

Tom blinked up at him, face beading with the tiniest droplets of water, and he moaned, rolling the sac around before letting it fall free with a pop.

"Fuck," Chris whispered, a shudder ripping through him.

Tom smiled and moved to the other side, sucking and rolling, careful with the spongy feel of his balls. When he took his cock in hand, he pumped it a few times, the tip gleaming.

He kissed the tip, red and extended past the foreskin, and closed his lips over it. Chris gasped, fingers streaking loudly on the tiled wall as he fought for a grip. It was bitter and salty, reminding

Tom of the almonds his mother used to pack for him when he was in elementary school, back when she used to still do that sort of thing. Tongue flicking over the slit, like boys did online, he lapped at the head, slipping down only an inch, letting his mouth get used to the flavor and feel of it. But Chris was shaking and looking down at him with something dark in his eyes, and Tom felt a spark zip down his spine. He crawled closer, sitting back on his heels and holding Chris by the hips. Widening his mouth he went as far down as he could before Chris was nudging his throat.

Gagging, Tom yanked his head away and coughed, wiping his mouth.

A big hand cupped his head. "Are you okay?" Chris asked, voice rough.

Tom nodded and hurried back, taking him in his mouth and sucking hard, tongue curling. He wanted all of him, he wanted his throat bruised and sore, the warm spill of his cum the only thing able to soothe it.

Bobbing his head, he alternated between sucking him and lapping at the underside, fascinated with the thick vein. It wasn't like studying his own cock, because the cock of another was suddenly like an entirely new animal, and Tom wanted to do it right, wanted Chris to remember this first time forever.

"Relax your jaw, baby," Chris rasped. "You're doing good. Can you go deeper?"

Tom, desperately wanting to, nodded and opened wide, swallowing Chris down again. But when he nudged his throat, Tom breathed in deep through his nose and relaxed his jaw, looking up at Chris.

"Good boy," Chris praised. "Hold still." He cupped a hand on Tom's head and wrapped the other around his neck, holding him steady. And then he started pumping his hips, slow and gentle. Mouth stretched, Tom knelt obediently, hands around Chris's thighs, staring up at him with near worship.

"Close your lips, that's it, good."

Tom moaned and Chris's hips stuttered.

"Such a good little slut, aren't you?"

Tom blushed, and blinked once, lashes heavy with shower water, dotted like diamonds, like a spider web in morning dew. He tried not to gag, but Chris was pushing in deeper than before and his eyes watered painfully. Breaking off fast, he coughed wetly, his hacks vibrating in the small bathroom.

"Tom—," Chris started, but Tom took a deep breath and wrapped his mouth around his cock again, moaning at the hard feel of it, the heat and scent, muted somewhat by the water. Sneaking a hand between Chris's legs, he trailed his fingers along his perineum, cupping his sac gently. He sucked hard, eagerly, saliva spilling down his chin, tears leaking from his eyes.

"Look at you," Chris breathed. "My cum slut. You gonna take my cum, baby? Swallow it down?"

Tom pulled off, voice wrecked, "Yes, Daddy." And then he continued, bobbing and sucking. Chris's fingers curled in his hair, hips moving faster, erratic and rough. Blinded by tears, Tom put his hands on Chris's hips, pushing back a little, but Chris was too far gone, gripping his hair with both hands, shoving into his mouth. The force of Chris's thrusts and the tingling in Tom's legs had him shuffling back, and Chris followed him. Pressed to the wall, jaw sore, Tom let Chris move his head, breaths short, feeling faint. He keened, legs bent, the water pooling under his ass.

“Take it,” Chris growled, hips snapping forward. “Take what Daddy gives you.” And then he cried out, shuddering violently. His cock pulsed in Tom’s mouth and a warm gush of cum spilled down his throat, fluttering to swallow it down.

Tom grunted and hollowed his cheeks, sucking on the head like he would a lollipop, small streams of cum coating his tongue, making him dizzy with want. His pussy pulsed, and he was hard, his erection hanging heavy between his legs, but he didn’t touch it, all his focus on Chris.

Chris sighed, weary, as he leaned up against the wall, his cock falling free from Tom’s lips.

Wiping his mouth, Tom grinned. “Did I do good, Daddy?”

Chris touched his cheek, eyes soft. “What did I do to deserve you?” he murmured.

Tom, heart flipping, leaned into his hand and nuzzled his palm. Chris squatted and reached between Tom’s legs, the water spraying on them full force now. He gasped, angling his head away just as Chris took his cock, fisting the tip, sinking two long fingers into his cunt. Pumping with his hand, his blue eyes were sharp on Tom’s face, absorbing every flinch, every lip bite. Stroke and pump, again and again, Tom squirming against the tile, he came fast, Chris aiming his cock up, ribbons landing on his cheeks and brow.

Tom giggled when Chris peppered his face with tiny kisses, lapping up the warm cum. He drew back, face oddly still pink, as if overwhelmed with something he couldn’t quite name.

Tom stayed quiet, wondering what Chris was thinking.

"I really do love you," Chris said at last, quietly, eyes on the wet floor.

Tom ran the blunt edge of his nails through Chris’s shorn hair. “I really do love you, too.”

They smiled, staring.

And then Chris pulled Tom to his feet and gave him a long kiss before toweling off and leaving the room. Tom rinsed his body once more, legs still feeling shaky and a little weak. He found his phone on the bed when he stepped out to change, and he took a moment to open up his pictures and pull up the one of Chris, gazing at it for a long minute before closing out of it.

"I'll be right back. Going to the garage," Chris called from the living room.

"Okay!" Tom called back, starting to rifle through his pile of belongings. After applying lotion on himself and rolling on the perfume Chris gave him—leaving wet streaks over his neck, behind his ear, and in the crooks of his elbows—Tom slipped into the bright pink panties and his favorite black jeans. Sitting low on his hips, they were tight and slim along his legs, making the curve of his ass look great. He pulled the black and white shirt on over his head and then sat at the edge of the bed to tie his new lace-up boots.

Jeans tucked into the top of the boots, Tom walked in circles around the room, liking the snug feel of them with every turn. They were a little tight, but he knew they would soften once he broke them in. Skimming some gloss over his lips, he finished with a generous coating of mascara, his lashes black-tinted, curling upward in long spikes. Tom gazed at himself in the mirror, adjusting his crotch slightly. His nails were still in good condition, dark glitter green, so he left them as they were.

After tucking his phone in his back pocket, he left the room to find Chris.

The evening was bleeding into night, the far horizon a light orange, reminding him of peaches and creamsicles and a lip balm he'd snagged from his mother's handbag when he was fourteen. The air was still warm, but the desert always grew cool at night and he hoped the bonfire would keep him warm. That, or Chris would.

His boots crunched on the pebbled ground as he approached the garage, light spilling from between the cracks of the doors. Chris was moving something heavy, a loud dragging noise cutting into the quiet night.

"Hey," Tom said, stepping onto the dusty concrete floor.

In the middle of pulling a large box into the far corner, Chris glanced at him and then did a double take.

"Tom," he said, eyes widening, lips parting in a surprised smile. "Baby—wow, you look gorgeous."

Tom stuck his hands into his back pockets, ducking his head with a blush. "Thanks. I think it looks pretty nice." He turned on his heel and let Chris look at his back, where the lace tickled softly on his skin, his bottom pert and high in his jeans.

Chris abandoned the box and stepped toward him. "More than nice. Shit, you're going to be the prettiest person there." He pulled him close, gasping when he saw Tom's eyes. "Your eyelashes!"

Tom laughed. "You like them?"

"I love everything about you," Chris whispered, taking Tom's hips and pushing him against the worktable. He cupped Tom's ass. "Are you wearing them?"

Nodding, Tom grinned.

"Which color?"

"Pink."

Chris groaned and bent to kiss him. He pulled back, licking his own lips in surprise. "Strawberry."

Tom giggled, and pulled on his hand, leading him to the door. "Let's go, Daddy, before you smear my mascara."

"Yes, babe," Chris laughed.

He chained the garage and locked the door to his house. Jumping on the Cross Bones, Tom put on his helmet, sporting the new pink bow sticker, and hugged Chris tight.

"Will you fuck me tonight, Daddy? When we get back?" He trailed a finger behind Chris's ear. "I want to drown in your cum."

Chris revved the engine. "Keep talking like that and we won't be going anywhere."

Tom smiled and pursed his lips, lowering his visor and hanging on tight.

**

The place they went to was even further in the desert, Tom was amazed to discover. He didn't think anyone lived out here, believing it was all state-owned land and rotting animal carcasses. Passing

by the black silhouettes of towering saguaros and squat cactus barrels and jumping cholla and thin-limbed Palo Verde trees, the only illumination came from the quarter moon and Chris's headlight. But up ahead, Tom spied a bright orange glow, spreading further into the sky the closer they got to it. A rickety two story house loomed into view, all peeling shingles and termite-bitten wood. Dozens of motorcycles were parked along the dark drive, the house's two main windows reflecting the giant bonfire so that they appeared like great blinking eyes. Chris maneuvered through the bikes to park just within the shadows of the house.

Tom ruffled his curls as soon as his helmet was off. Chris took his hand and they walked toward the inferno, bracketed by a low stone wall blackened by previous fires. Around the fire, a good distance away, was a continuous circular stone bench, where a crowd of people was already sitting. There were more people present than had gone to see Chris the weekend before. Dressed in lots of leather and black denim, the throng was on the older side, quite a few of them with lined faces or gray hair, the oldest being Mick, whom Tom immediately picked out. Mick was seated in the middle of the wall, beer bottle in hand, red and white bandana tied loosely around his neck. He smiled at Tom, inclining his beer toward him in greeting.

Tom squeezed Chris's hand and stepped closer to him.

A cheer arose in the crowd when people saw Chris approaching. Many were drinking, many had tattoos and rough ear piercings, skin leathered by the sun, all smiling genuinely as each swooped Chris into a hug. Tom hung back, smiling as Chris returned each greeting with just as much affection.

"Quite the welcome, ain't it?"

Tom jumped and turned. Mick was standing just next to him, eyes narrowed on Chris.

Tom crossed his arms. "Why wouldn't it be?" Tom said, a bit more sharply than he intended. "Being gone for so long." *Because of your orders*, he wanted to add.

Mick's head snapped in his direction. He smiled. "Oh, and here I thought you were a timid one."

Tom shrugged, not wanting to give Mick the satisfaction of looking at him. "For those who deserve it, yes."

Mick tossed his head back and laughed, a great booming cackle from deep in his lungs. "How in the world did he ever find you, so delicate a beauty?" he asked, eyes twinkling with mirth.

Tom smirked, eyes on Chris, who had just turned to look for him, eyes scanning the crowd. "We found each other," he replied. Chris walked over as soon as he saw him, and nodding once at Mick, took Tom's outstretched hand and pulled him into the crowd.

Tom gave Mick one last look, blank and slightly disapproving before turning his back on him and following Chris to the other side of the ring. Chris took him through the small groups of people, rattling off names that Tom immediately forgot. But Chris introduced him to everyone as his boyfriend, setting Tom's stomach aflutter.

"Well, hot damn!" Tom heard someone cry. "Has Mick gotten a look at this one?"

Someone yanked the person away before Tom could pinpoint who it was, but he noticed Chris's brows draw low, the hard clench in his jaw. He gripped Tom closer and moved on.

Apart from that one comment, no one batted an eye at Chris's introductions, and Tom was grateful for that. There were a few alphas in the crowd, apart from Chris and Mick. Tom turned every

which way, trying to keep the ranks in order, but it was too much too soon. The crowd was a mixture of alpha and omega, with a handful betas included.

A few people hung back, Tom noticed, all men and younger than most. Maybe these were new additions to the gang. Six years was a long time and change happened no matter the circumstances. Still, they all looked at Chris with something like reluctant awe, a bit of jealousy in their stares, sipping their beers, jaws gritted with every swallow. Tom could imagine what it might be like for them, watching Chris welcomed back like some kind of long lost son, falling right back into his spot in the crew while they might have labored and fought to prove their worth to the other members.

Tom did his best to ignore them.

Chris headed to a spot where ten burgeoning ice chests sat on the ground.

"What did he say to you?" Chris asked as soon as they were out of anyone's earshot.

Tom explained, keeping his voice down.

Chris shook his head, stopping and rooting around for a drink. "I don't get what's with him. He's been strange ever since I got out. It's unnerving."

"I don't care about him," Tom said, sidling up next to Chris. "Your friends look so nice."

Chris straightened, a beer in one hand. "I've missed them. Since I've been back, I've only been able to see a few here and there. But everyone's here tonight and they're all very interested in *you*."

He uncapped the beer and handed it to Tom, who frowned. "Me?"

"Pretty boy like you, they all want the details," Chris laughed, lighting a cigarette. But there was a hard edge to his chuckle and Tom wondered if it had to do with general nosiness or that remark about Mick.

A twinge of nervousness lit in Tom's gut. "I didn't even think about that, Chris. Would they judge me? Or you?" He hated how small his voice sounded.

Chris blew out smoke and tossed an arm around his shoulders. "No. No way. These are my friends. We go back years. Some of them are mated. Some aren't. Everyone knows what's up. And I'm a grown ass man. I can do what I want. Plus," he said, murmuring around his cigarette. "I've never brought anyone around before, so..."

He left it at that and Tom stared at him, a shot of adrenaline lighting in his blood. But then he remembered that Mick had ordered Chris to bring Tom today. If he hadn't done that, would Chris have brought him? And yet, they were so recently mated, their new bond still vibrating around the edges. He couldn't imagine being apart from Chris, or vice versa, other than when it was absolutely necessary, like when he had to go home during the week or when Chris had to work. Tom knew he would have come to this bonfire regardless of anything.

He took a swig of beer and grimaced as he swallowed it down, his first taste of the stuff. It was wheaty and sharp and left a thick aftertaste in his mouth.

"You're not drinking?" he asked Chris.

"No," Chris said, eyes on the other side of the fire, where Mick and a few of the older men sat laughing at something Mick had just said. "Absolutely not."

There it was again, the sense that Chris was uneasy about something, and Tom picked up on it like a glare of light in a dark room. It seemed centered on Mick, and Tom wondered if he still smelled of the old man because Chris didn't miss an opportunity to rub his cheek to the back of Tom's neck, licking at the spot where ragged red lines had since faded. He took Chris's hand and squeezed it.

A man and a woman approached from beyond the fire, and Chris blew out smoke in a hurry to make introductions.

"These are our hosts. Jake Harper. An old, old buddy of mine," Chris said, laughing. "And this lovely woman is Isabel Ortiz. Is it wife now? It's been so long, I have no idea!"

Jake laughed and shook his head, and the woman tossed her head back, her long black hair in flowing curls over her shoulder.

"Ha! He wishes," she said, her voice thickened slightly by nicotine and salt. She was covered in tattoos, but it was too dark to make any of them out. "My, you're a pretty one." She extended her hand to Tom, who shook it with a smile. She wore gold hoop earrings and had burgundy lipstick on her full mouth. Tom suddenly knew that if he asked to try it on, she would let him.

"Your name's so pretty," he said. "Like you."

She batted her lashes and tossed a surprise glance at Jake. "Look at that. Pretty and genuinely kind. Keep him close, Christopher."

"I will," Chris said, slinking an arm around Tom's waist.

"You're an omega," Jake said, eyes drifting to Tom's neck. The bite mark was faded, only the thinnest scar visible in certain light. But Tom knew that Jake could tell. It was the scent, Chris had said.

"Mating young is the best, let me tell you," Isabel said, hooking her arm through Jake's. "My first alpha died when we were in the bond only a few years. Car accident."

Tom squeezed himself against Chris. Voice soft, he asked, "What happens when your alpha dies?"

"You're released from the bond. You become available for claim again."

"Oh," Tom said, rubbing his head on Chris's shoulder. Isabel smiled.

"You're fresh out the box, little darling. You have any more questions, you let me know, cupcake. We'll make it a girls' night, yeah?"

Tom grinned. "Okay."

The night passed in the same fashion. Chris kept Tom close to him, sitting them down in the middle of a group riders that seemed the most affectionate with Chris, telling stories of his time in prison, catching up with what had happened since he'd seen them last. Tom counted more than one set of eyes flick his way when they thought he wasn't looking, and he started to realize that he didn't care. He felt gorgeous that night. His boots were gorgeous. His mascara and lip gloss were gorgeous. His shirt was gorgeous and his Daddy was gorgeous, sitting beside him, their thighs touching, Chris's arm thrown behind Tom's shoulders the whole time.

The more Tom drank, the braver he felt with looking around outside their small group. He realized there were some other young people, not as young as him, but girls in their twenties shadowing

some of the men, whom Tom assumed were their mates. He wasn't about to go and make friends with them, at least not now, not so soon, but it helped him feel better about his age among these more weathered individuals. He smiled when he saw Jake and Isabel by the low wall, Isabel sitting on Jake's lap and laughing as she gripped a beer bottle in hand. Tom really liked her.

Sitting back comfortably in his chair, he stretched his legs out in front of him, admiring his boots, his thin legs, the black and white stripes of his shirt. Another swig of beer and he leaned his head back, fascinated by the great bowl that was the sky, the stars flashing past.

He could hear the soothing and deep cadence of Chris's voice, gesticulating with only one hand, the other thrown casually across Tom's lap as he talked. He and his friends laughed and shouted over each other, making up for lost time. Tom leaned his head on Chris's shoulder, eyes wide on the group of girls that had brought out an old boom box from the side shed and fiddled with the tuner, settling on a poppy kind of station, of all things. They all cheered when a dance number came on, and even though the older folks grumbled half-heartedly about the choice of music, they all looked content to see their girls dancing about, like those ancient mystic women darting around the bonfire, bangles at their wrists, long hair bouncing, painted lips spread wide in dazzling smiles.

Tom sang along under his breath, foot tapping. He wanted to dance with those girls, he wanted to hop around on both feet, beer bottle in hand, dust rising to coat his skin. But he didn't know them and it seemed terribly uncouth to just invite himself into their tiny dancing circle.

"And what about you, Tom. You go to the university or something?"

It took a moment for Tom to realize he was being spoken to. He blinked and tore his eyes away from the girls. "I'm sorry?"

The guy repeated his question and Tom froze, suddenly aware of Chris's hand in his hair, ruffling the curls gently. Where the lie came from, he had no idea, but next thing he knew, he'd spun a story about how he'd just finished up his first year at the university. That he was turning twenty-one in February and that Chris had fixed his ten speed for him, cracking a joke about how it didn't exactly have the same kind of power as the bikes he was used to working with.

"I hear you on that," said the guy who had addressed him first. "Man, Chris, it still hurts me about that bike you totaled just before getting tossed in the big house," and just as quick, the focus was off Tom and back on Chris, who relaxed beside him and continued the conversation.

Tom drank some more beer, relieved, feeling as if he'd passed some sort of test. Still, he kept catching one of the guy's skeptical looks, averting his eyes when the other didn't look away. Working extra hard not to fidget, he couldn't help curling his hand around Chris's elbow, taking another long drink.

At the first lull in conversation, the guy leaned forward, eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry but, how old did you say you were again?"

"I'm sorry, but *who* did you say you were again?" Chris cut in, striking a match and lighting a new cigarette. The flame, Tom couldn't help but notice, lit his face in an orange glow, the cold stare he gave the guy hard and gleaming.

The group around them burst out laughing, and the man, one of the new members it seemed, looked away, taking an angry swig of his beer.

"Don't fucking mess with Chris, Johnny!"

"He'll fuck you up," another man cried, and there was more laughter.

The man muttered and sat back in his seat, effectively abandoning the conversation.

Tom wasn't exactly sure when it happened, or how much time had passed, but there was suddenly lots of good natured shouting and then a rickety folding table was set before them and Chris was rolling up the sleeve of his flannel shirt. He was going to arm wrestle, Tom realized in his slightly drunken stupor, and his opponent was the man who had questioned Tom's age.

Tom stared with wide eyes, accepting the cigarette Chris passed to him, taking a small drag.

The guy tried valiantly, but there was no question Chris would win in the end. He slammed the guy's arm down and sat back, smiling smugly as the other stood up, pointing a thick finger at Chris, yelling all sorts of shit about how he cheated and it was all rigged.

The crowd booed and patted his back, telling him not to be a sore loser but he broke away. He charged at Chris, who stood in a flash and landed one solid punch to his jaw. There was a sickening crack and the guy hit the ground, moaning and dazed.

Tom gasped, cigarette dangling from his fingers. Everyone seemed entirely unconcerned, hooting and dragging the guy to his feet, dusting him off and handing him another beer.

Chris threw an arm around Tom's shoulders and walked them back to their seats, snagging the cigarette and inhaling deep. Tom stood on his tiptoes and kissed his neck, Chris muttering on about 'that fucking dumbass'.

The later it got, the cooler it became and soon Tom was snug under Chris's arm, shivering slightly. The girls were lying along the low wall, dozing under blankets and sweaters, while the older people continued talking softly in their leather jackets, fresh beer bottles in hand. How any of these people planned on riding out of there after the amount of alcohol they'd consumed, Tom had no idea, but then again, they seemed like the sort of people who didn't much abide by rules.

He shifted in his seat and Chris hugged him tight, peering down at him.

"You okay, baby?"

Tom squirmed. "I have to piss."

Chris nodded. "Okay."

As soon as they stood, Tom felt dizzy. Chris snatched him around the waist and guided him away from the others and the warmth of the fire. Chills burst over his skin, and he realized suddenly that the ride home was going to be very cold.

Chris led him to the dark side of the house, where ancient looking vehicles had rusted into the ground, bracketed by tall weeds and brambles. Chris kept a hand on the back of his neck as Tom urinated into the weeds, moaning as his bladder released. He zipped himself up and swayed on his feet, Chris tugging him closer until Tom collapsed against his chest with a tired huff. Lips slid along Tom's neck, big arms bracketing his slim belly, and he breathed out a soft laugh, blinking slow and sleepily.

Head tossed back on Chris's shoulders, Tom smiled up at the stars. They rocked in place together, Chris mouthing at his jaw.

"You feel so warm," he murmured, hands trailing down over his hips.

Tom laughed. "That's rich, considering the fact that I'm freezing."

"You're tipsy," Chris whispered.

"I am not!" Tom cried, giggling again. He stumbled back a few steps and Chris tightened his hold on him. His head spun and he clutched at Chris. "Daddy, my throat hurts."

"That's from blowing me, babe."

Tom hummed. "I want to taste you again." He spun unevenly and tugged on the button of Chris's jeans. "Please, Daddy. I'll be super quiet."

Chris gripped his head hard, and then turned to look at the side of the house, around which they could still hear the shouts and chatter of the rest of the crew, the roaring blaze glowing against the black sky.

"Daddy," Tom murmured, hiccupping once. He giggled and hiccupped again. "Daddy, fuck me."

Chris rubbed their noses together, their breaths puffing out in white clouds. Tom was shivering despite holding him tightly.

"Not here, baby."

Tom pouted, foot stomping down softly. "But I've been so good, Daddy."

"I know, baby, but anyone could just—."

Tom cupped the front of his jeans and let out an excited little squeal when he felt Chris half hard. He dropped to his knees and unbuckled him fast. Chris cursed quietly, but cupped Tom's head anyway, endeared by his youthful eagerness. He cast one more glance to the corner of the house, but they remained in the darkened quiet, unnoticed for now behind the rusted old car with its busted windows and mouse nests.

Tom's mouth on his cock was searing and he hissed, hips jutting forward slightly. Tom moaned and blinked those long lashes at him, the blue of his eyes looking eerie in the light from the distant fire. All tongue and tight lips, Tom moaned around him and Chris stroked his hair, feeling his chest tighten at the soft look of adoration Tom gave him, the cling of his blue tinged hands, the slight sway of his inebriated body. Chris kept him steady, moving his hips. Tom relaxed his neck and let Chris fuck his mouth, tears and throat burning, gagging only a little bit, his blood pumping faster and faster. And when Chris came, half stifled grunt of cold-laced breath, Tom swallowed and cleaned him good, smiling wide and lapping at the sticky drippings.

Chris hauled him up and tucked himself in. Long arms wrapped around his neck and then Tom's mouth was on his and they both groaned, falling back against the car, grabbing at each other roughly.

"Daddy," Tom breathed, his panted giggles teasing.

"I think it's time to go," Chris said, fighting to control his lust. He'd just come in Tom's mouth and his cock was already starting to stir with more interest.

Tom nodded eagerly, eyes glazed and half-lidded. His cheeks were flush and his arms were pebbled with chills. Chris bundled him close, wanting him wrapped up safe and warm in bed. He pulled them back to the others, many of whom were also leaving. It was just after two in the morning and the fire was dying down. Everyone said their goodbyes, including Mick, who shook

Chris's hand and winked at Tom.

Tom shifted and hid his face in Chris's neck, murmuring quietly.

"Lightweight, is he?" Mick said good-naturedly, but Chris couldn't help noticing Mick's eyes drift down Tom's body, lingering on his dust-coated knees. And the sudden rage he felt at knowing Mick was imagining Tom doing something as intimate as blowing him edged Chris's vision in red.

He nodded once tersely before pulling Tom away, tottering and stumbling beside him.

Most of the bikes were gone, so Chris would be able maneuver onto the road without a problem. What worried him were Tom's chattering teeth. Before climbing on the Cross Bones, Chris unbuttoned his flannel shirt, leaving only the white muscle shirt he wore underneath.

"Here, baby," he said softly, draping it over Tom's back, buttoning it up to his neck. He swam in it, but it would do. Practically asleep on his feet, Tom leaned heavily against him.

"Will you stay awake for me, baby?" Chris asked, fighting back the sickening image of Tom slipping off the back of his bike.

Tom hummed half-heartedly, but nodded. "Yes, Daddy."

"Are you sure? I need you to be absolutely sure. Otherwise, we can hole up somewhere together in Jake's house if you can't make the trip."

"No," Tom said faintly. "I want your bed."

Chris hopped on the bike and patted the seat behind him.

"Climb on, baby. It's okay."

Tom eyed the seat blankly, drunk enough to not realize how dangerous riding intoxicated was. But there was literally no traffic on these back roads and Chris's house wasn't far.

With some frustrated whining and shifting about, Tom finally managed to sit on the bike, arms wrapped around his waist, already dozing against his back. His cheeks were freezing, and Chris ran a hand roughly over Tom's arms hoping the friction would help warm him a little before they headed home. Afraid the helmet would be too heavy for Tom to hold up, Chris put it on himself for lack of a better place to keep it.

When Chris started the bike, Tom startled and cried out softly in fear, but Chris soothed his hands, kicking at the ground to guide the bike on the road.

"Shh, it's alright. Daddy's here. I won't let you fall, baby. I promise you."

Tom quieted down, and Chris accelerated on the pavement, the cold winds cutting around them. But Chris hardly felt it. He was a free man under the night sky, his bike purring strong and Tom snuggling closer. There was nothing wrong with the world.

Except there was.

The way Mick had stared at Tom like a wolf circling a lamb set Chris's teeth on edge. And what the fuck had Stevie meant when, with a knowing smile and appeasing look, he'd asked if Mick had taken a look at 'this one', and jerked his thumb in Tom's direction? Had Chris missed so much in prison? Or was something coming to light only now that Tom was in his life? His mate and omega?

Mick couldn't – he *wouldn't* dare to mess with another alpha's omega.

He shook his head, not liking when he wasn't in control. He knew he would need to watch him carefully from that point on. Tom certainly wasn't helpless, but he was still young, still a little green around the edges and so, so beautiful. He really had been the prettiest one there that night, even up against girls in their prime. There was something so innocent and fragile about Tom, a soft quality that made the roughest men want to touch and mark and claim.

Only, Chris had already done that and there wasn't a chance in hell he was about to let another man try the same. Nor should they try. All alphas knew better.

That round pixy face with lips pursed around Chris's cigarette, the trembly way he would call him 'daddy', the way when in the dead of night he would find Chris and nestle close, soft sighs in Chris's ear. Tom was his and no one was taking him away. There was so much about an alpha/omega relationship that Tom still hadn't been exposed to. Maybe speaking with Isabel would be a good idea. She and Tom seemed to get on so well. Tom really seemed to like her.

Just as he was turning into his yard, Tom shifted against him, hands spreading over Chris's abdomen. Chris tightened his hold and Tom sagged on him again, warm and moist.

Rather than take the bike inside the garage, Chris parked it as close to the back wall of his house as possible, just outside his bedroom window. He stood and kept a steadying hand on Tom's shoulder, stooping to pick him up in his arms.

Chris caught a scent of his perfume and dusty sweat, sweet like a child's, and he nosed along Tom's temple trying to chase it. Cradling him gently, amazed at how light Tom was, he maneuvered a heavy tarp over the stationary bike. Keys in hand, Tom whispering softly, Chris walked into his house, down the hall and into his room. He lay Tom down on the bed.

Gently, he removed his boots, his jeans, his shirt, and lastly, his lovely pink panties. Those he stuffed under his pillow. Completely unconscious, Tom lay perfectly still, brows slightly furrowed, hands looking bigger than usual next to his naked hips. Stripping quickly, Chris arranged Tom higher on the bed and then crawled under the covers next to him.

"Daddy?" Tom mumbled, lashes fluttering.

"Sleep now, baby. We're home."

Tom sighed. And with the lights off, Tom radiating heat, burrowing against him, Chris kissed the crown of his head and closed his eyes.

Silky Stockings Rustling

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

Tom woke with the worst headache of his life. He whimpered and kept his eyes closed, pulling the blanket over his face.

Someone chuckled.

“You need to drink water, babe.”

“No,” Tom whispered, fussing.

“Take these pills at least. They’ll help with the pain.”

Blindly, Tom let Chris feed him the pills and water, and collapsed again, groaning.

“What happened last night?” he grumbled. His teeth felt lined with grit, tongue huge and dry.

The bed dipped and a big hand cupped his head. “Well, you met everyone. Had a few drinks, and I found out that you turn into a little sleepy kitten when you’re drunk.”

Tom huffed. “Did I embarrass you?” he asked quietly.

“Not at all. You were with me all night and it was great. You were great.”

Tom blinked up at him. “What time is it, Daddy?”

“Just after one.”

Tom rolled and pressed his face to Chris’s thigh. “Wanna sleep s’more.”

“How about we go eat and then bring a movie home and then I’ll fuck you nice and slow.”

Tom considered this. “Can we do all those things but in reverse order?”

Chris tossed his head back and laughed, Tom’s stomach flipping happily at the sound. “Is my princess feeling neglected?”

Tom pouted. “Daddy promised to fuck me when we got back and he didn’t.”

“Yes, but princess was asleep.”

“I’m awake now.”

Chris smiled and stroked Tom’s cheek. “Okay. I’ll fuck you now.”

Tom bounced up and ran to the bathroom, his headache already starting to fade with the pain pills.

“Let me brush my teeth!”

Chris laughed again and waited patiently.

Because Tom was such a great big bundle of excitement, Chris lay back and let Tom bounce away on his cock, already sopping, so tight, that heat so snug around him. Those slim thighs worked a fast pace, hands splayed on his chest, head of golden curls thrown back. He swiveled and he moaned. Chris memorized every detail, the hot flush of pink on his long throat, the small cries, the hot and wet heat of his cunt swallowing Chris's cock down to the root.

"Daddy," he moaned, his round ass pressing down hard.

"Ride me, baby," Chris whispered, hands on his hips, helping him rotate. His cock left wet streaks on his belly, red and swollen. Tom loved it, and Chris loved watching him fall apart.

"Yes, yes, right there, Daddy...almost—," Tom whined, mouth falling open as he clenched on a hard thrust and screamed, his release thrumming through his limbs, making him tremble and collapse forward. Chris caught him, his cum sticky on their chests. He took a handful of Tom's hair, gripping it.

"Gonna fuck your pussy hard. Are you mine? My princess?"

Half-dazed, Tom nodded against his neck, whispers loud and hot. "Yes, Daddy. Your sweet princess. Your little boy."

Planting his feet, Chris fucked up into him, skin slapping loudly until he came too, powerful hips lifting Tom from the bed. He grunted and thrust again and again, Tom whimpering and driving him mad with need.

They crumpled, breathing hard and kissing lazily, hands roaming in each other's sweaty hair.

"I'm starving," Tom complained and they grinned.

"Come on then," Chris said, smacking Tom's ass. Tom yelped and hopped up, pulling Chris into the bathroom with him.

**

The ride to Tom's house was as quiet and somber as the last time. Tom sighed into the muffled space of his helmet, his fingers spread over Chris's abdomen. Strapped to his back was his bag, filled with clothes to be washed, gifts to hide. He was already planning a trip back to Chris's sometime this week, after Chris was done with work. The week was simply too long without seeing him at least once. But he hoped to make it a surprise for Chris.

After a quick peck on the lips on the curb before his house, Tom laughed when Chris donned the helmet, the pink bow bright in the sunlight.

"Quiet now, mouse," Chris muttered, but his eyes in the crook of the visor were crinkled.

"Love you, Daddy," Tom whispered, embracing him once more before walking backwards up the drive.

"Love you too, babe. I'll see you next weekend."

Tom watched him drive away, waving as Chris turned the corner. Heading up the drive, he caught movement at the front window, but saw no one when he narrowed his eyes at the house. Since his mother's car was missing, it had to be Jeff spying on him. Feeling braver than he'd felt in months,

Tom headed straight for the front door instead of slipping in through his bedroom window. Any sign of Jeff was gone, the living room and kitchen empty. In his room, Tom locked the door and upended his bag on the bed. Out toppled his dirty clothes and tubes of lip gloss. His heart-shaped sunglasses and new phone case. A small paper-clipped bundle of money.

Tom frowned. Unclipping the bills, he counted a hundred dollars. The note said, "For whatever you need while you're not with me. Román said you're welcome to eat at his restaurant, no charge. Stay safe, babe. Love you." Smiling, heart flipping in his chest, Tom hurriedly stuffed the money under his mattress. He knew exactly what to use some of it for.

It wasn't until later in the week that he was able to make the trip. The swap meet wasn't nearly as exciting as when he and Chris had visited at night. Dust gusted through the stalls, most empty during the day. But he hoped that the one he was looking for wasn't. He was winded and sweaty after his bike ride, nose scrunched against the glare of the bright golden dirt. Walking his bike through the aisles, Tom peered through the flapping tent entrances, recognizing an item, a face. He was close. Excited now, he turned a corner and saw it.

Bone-colored mannequins perched haughtily on the front counter, lingerie on display, bright petals over the blue canvas of sky. An Asian woman stood leaning on a metal pole, eyes narrowed on him. Behind her, the stall yawned dark and cool, a deep tent with walls on both sides. He could see more nearly nude dolls inside. Smiling, Tom approached.

"You're open," he said, happily. "I was so worried you wouldn't be here during the day." He parked his bike by the counter.

"You here other night," she said. "With boyfriend."

"Yes," Tom said brightly. "I was hoping I could buy something from you."

She flicked the cigarette away. Mouth pursed with bright red lipstick, she stared without blinking. Gulping, Tom waited.

"You boy or girl?"

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Tom shrugged and half-giggled. "Does it matter?"

She returned his shrug. "To me no. I sorry if too big question."

"It's alright. I think I look like both?"

Humming, she nodded, and then smiled. Gesturing for him to follow her, she turned toward her stall. "Come. Come. I show you pretty things."

And indeed she did, leading Tom through the inside of her tent. She measured his waist and chest and hips, humming and digging through racks of lace and satin.

"What's your name?" he asked, tugging the hem of his shirt down.

"Lifen."

"Lifen," he whispered, liking the sound. "Does that mean something?"

She grinned and straightened, her purple shawl trailing the floor. With a sharp, green-painted nail, she tapped on her temple. "Mean clever."

Lifen laughed, a high trickle burst that had Tom grinning too. They went through the tent gathering items, Tom holding a bundle of lingerie in his size.

“Buy two, get one free,” she said, and patted his arm. She drifted away and, eyes wide, Tom started rifling through them, wanting them all. They were relatively cheaply priced, considering how nice they felt under his wandering fingers. If he’d gone to a boutique at the mall, similar items would be quadruple the price. With the money Chris gave him, he’d be able to afford the two needed to get the third free, and still have plenty of money left over for anything else he might need in the meantime.

He finally chose a sheer light blue teddy with a matching thong, a dark purple babydoll that glittered as he held it up, and the original piece that had caught his eye to begin with. It was a black lace garter belt with straps. It came with a black bra and thong, and mesh stockings.

“These,” he said, smiling giddily as he passed her the lingerie.

She nodded seriously and started ringing him up. “Very good. Your boyfriend like.”

“Oh, I certainly hope so.”

Lifen patted his hand. “He like. Yes. He like.”

Bagging his stuff, she passed him a receipt and his change. “Your name?”

“It’s Tom.”

“You come back and see me again, Tom. More pretty things for you.”

“I will. Thank you!”

He waved goodbye to her from his bike, pushing off with one foot and balancing his bag on the handlebars. The light fizzing in his lungs became sweetly unbearable and he found himself laughing out loud as he pedaled down the streets of the city, bag of lingerie swinging by his knees. He wiped the tears from his eyes as he zoomed up his driveway, and hurried through his bedroom window. He would cut off the tags from his purchases and try them on. And then he would send his Daddy a surprise.

**

The mechanic shop closed early Thursday nights in the summer because the owner, a guy named Jessie, liked to go to his mother’s house to watch baseball with her. He was flat out unapologetic about his attachment to his ailing mother, and his workers knew better than to rib him about it. Chris was grateful for it today. He’d been feeling off center, his muscles a tad tender, a soft undercurrent of fever making sweat sprout on his face. He just wasn’t used to working full days since getting released. In prison, his day was broken up into a strict schedule that was vastly different from the physical demands of car maintenance. He lifted and rotated the towers of tires, rolled under propped up cars and trucks, squinting into the greasy belly of their engines, or bent under hoods with wrenches and liquid measurers. A tad more fatigued than he was accustomed to, Chris locked his tools in the cabinet against the back wall and walked through the garage into the shop.

He was scrubbing his hands with soap in the small bathroom out back, walls dotted with moisture and peeling paint, when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He dried his hands on his jeans, still dirty but better than the crusty towel left bunched on the toilet lid. Fishing his phone out, he unlocked the screen and saw it was a text message from Tom, with an attachment.

I miss you Daddy.

The picture nearly made him drop his phone. Eyes bulging, Chris stared down at his screen, at the image of Tom. Shot from chest to mid-thigh, lying on his bed it seemed, Tom was wearing a black bra, his hand with those sweetly long fingers aiming low past the dip of his belly button to one of those most delicious sights Chris had ever seen. Hard cock jutting forward, full and hard, his balls – shaved and smooth – were cupped gently in a tiny thong. His hips were sheathed in a thin lace garter belt with straps that clipped onto some kind of stockings, the top of which Chris could barely just see.

“Fuck,” he breathed, wondering where Tom had gotten such a piece of lingerie. But it was him alright. There was no mistaking those hands, or those thin thighs, or his smooth belly and cut waist.

Something thrummed deep in his chest, and Chris staggered back against the wall, breathing ragged. It wasn’t happening just yet, but it would soon. With a small panicked sound, Chris yanked the bathroom door open and barreled down the hall to his boss’s office.

“Jessie, I might not be in tomorrow.”

Jessie put down his pen. “What’s wrong? You look like shit.”

“I think I’m going to rut soon.”

Jessie shrugged and glanced back down at his paperwork. “Think you’ll be in Monday?”

“Maybe.”

“Alright. Fine by me. I’ll have Carlos clear your schedule tomorrow and Monday. I’ll pay you half of what I usually do.”

Chris was nodding, already turning around. “Fine. Totally fine. I appreciate it. Thank you.”

Jessie voice called him back. “You got a mate?”

Chris turned, voice cracking. “Yeah.”

“Godspeed to her, then.”

Chris turned away without a word, not bothering to correct him when he knew Tom himself wouldn’t have minded – would have even delighted in the fact – that Jessie had called him a ‘her’. Wiping his brow on the sleeve of his shirt, Chris pushed out into the early afternoon sunlight and lit a quick cigarette. He took a nervous, shaky drag, breath stuttering. Taking his phone, he typed out a quick message.

Crushing the half-smoked butt under his boot, Chris finally climbed onto his Harley and turned the engine, feeling the roar and vibration of its metal throat thrust through him.

It wouldn’t happen yet. But it would soon.

**

Tom had been lying in bed with a small smile on his face, running a hand up and down his belly, flesh tickled by his own touch, when his phone buzzed with a new message.

Wear that under whatever you want. It’s going to happen soon. Pack for at least four days. I’m on my way.

Squeaking, Tom scrambled up and threw on the first shirt and pair of jeans he found. Throwing clothes into his duffel bag, he took his new lingerie items and phone charger, as well as his heart sunglasses and new lip glosses. He hadn't had time to fix any jagged corners of his nail polish, but he tossed the bottles in anyway even though he knew he probably would be too busy stuck to Chris to redo them.

Finally. Chris's first rut with him.

Burning red, Tom swallowed around the lump of excitement and nervousness that had lit in his stomach. Would Chris be too rough? Violent? Tom liked the hair pulling and all the biting, being held down and bruised from lips and fingers, but how exactly would Chris be different in a rut? Would it be all blind lust and desire? Tom remembered how helpless he'd felt during his heat. The urgency and the need. He couldn't get enough of Chris, couldn't stand to be apart from him. He could only imagine it would be somewhat the same for Chris.

Perfume. Boots. All his new panties and lovely lace shirt. He packed everything. And then he texted his mother, who was still at the diner working.

Mom! Guess what! Steph from my history class asked if I wanted to go with him and his family to a camping trip on the northern trail. We'll probably be back Monday or Tuesday. Can I go? Please please?

He sat at the edge of his bed, gnawing at the corner of his phone case, anxiety spiking through him. It was a gamble asking her permission. Maybe she might not have noticed he was gone for four days, but if she had? He couldn't begin to guess how she would react. Calling the police or investigating on her own. He highly doubted it, but he could never be sure what Jeff would convince her to do. At least this way, she knew for sure he would be gone for a valid reason, and using a made up name like 'Steph' meant she had no one to go to in case she had questions.

His phone vibrated and he jumped up with a little cry. Her response was not what he expected.

Tom? You have a phone?

Shit. He scrambled to think of something. *No. It's my friend's. I'm borrowing it. So can I go?*

Her reply took a minute. *Sure. Have fun. Be careful and remember...be polite...with everything.*

Or in other words, don't let anyone see your vagina. Biting back the wave of anger cresting up his throat, Tom took a deep breath and replied: *I won't don't worry! Thanks! Bye!*

Bouncing on his desk chair for a full minute, Tom finally heard the roar of a motorcycle and jumped to his feet, grabbing his bag and grunting as he lifted the window. Slamming it back down once outside, he ran out to the curb and immediately noticed the sweaty pallor of Chris's face, the hint of desperation edging into his eyes, how they were beginning to bruise.

"Daddy," he whispered, reaching out a hand and cupping his stubbled jaw. Chris turned into the touching, sniffing at Tom's wrist, lashes curled as he gazed up at him.

"Babe," he rasped, and Tom's heart flipped. "You're wearing it?"

Tom nodded, grinning. He was still semi-hard, the thong barely holding him in. His shirt was loose enough that the outline of the bra was lost, but he felt the snug pull of the lace, and loved it.

He climbed on behind Chris, sans helmet, and cuddled up against his back, kissing the firm space between those wide shoulder blades.

“Tom?” Chris said again, voice rough. Tom squeezed his waist, tapered low to his powerful hips.

“I’m here, Daddy,” he said, dragging his palm up to the dipped hollow of Chris’s chest. “I’ve always been just here.”

Chris stared straight forward and gunned the engine, pushing off from the ground, one big hand curling, heavy and warm and for just a moment, over Tom’s.

**

Chris’s house rustled with that silence that permeates a place that’s been empty for many hours. As soon as they barreled through the door, Chris led him to the bedroom, the scent of motor oil and sweat rising from him.

“Daddy, do you want a bath first?”

Chris growled low in his throat and mouthed at Tom’s neck. Tom shivered and stood high on his tiptoes, hands clawed on those big biceps.

“Although,” he breathed, trailing his mouth over Chris’s shoulder. “I love how sticky you are. How dirty. Oh, Daddy, touch me with these hands.” His cock gave a strong pulse and his hips jabbed forward.

“Let me see this thing you have on for me,” Chris whispered, taking a handful of Tom’s ass and squeezing. “My little teasing princess, sending your Daddy a picture of you in it. I almost fucking passed out.”

Tom giggled and spun out of Chris’s grasp, swaying his hips as he walked. Peeking over his shoulder he smiled slow and small, basking in the heavy gaze Chris held on him, the thud of his boots trailing his quieter Converse. He dropped his lashes, a blush spreading over his cheeks, and toed off his shoes and pulled up his shirt. Chris gasped at the first sight of the lace bra Tom wore. Jeans slung low on his hips, Tom turned and let Chris drink in the sight of him, flat belly, long clavicles, thin arms reaching to his fly and dragging it down.

Hands clenching, Chris licked his lips and leaned his weight from foot to foot, eyes sharp on Tom as he undressed. Thumbs hitched at his waist, Tom turned away again, shy and ecstatic, and started bending low as he pushed his jeans down his legs inch by slow inch.

And then Chris’s hand was on his hip, oil-stained fingers trembling a path down the smooth and plump curve of his buttock. Tom blinked up at him, holding still, flesh goose-pimpling.

“My precious girl,” Chris said softly, thumb dragging down between Tom’s cheeks, the thong strap hot as Tom panted down at the floor. Pressing lower still, Chris drew his thumbnail over the moist cloth-covered slit of his pussy, down more to cup his cock, barely sheathed by the thong. “Precious boy. My boy. I love that I’m mated to you. That I am bonded to you. I think of you all day, Tom. That you’re mine. I catch your scent on me sometimes, leaning under a hood, sliding under a car, it rises up to my face and I breathe you in and I wonder if you’re okay.”

“Daddy,” Tom breathed, spreading his legs just a small bit, the silky stockings rustling over his skin. Chris wrapped an arm around his belly and hauled Tom up and over to the bed. Tom squealed and laughed as he landed on the bed with a bounce.

“Open your legs,” Chris said, working to unbuckle his belt. Tom’s legs fell open like pale butterfly wings, the sheer mesh of the stockings rippling over his slender muscles, the black thong straining to hold him. Chris shoved his jeans down and tossed his boots away. His stained shirt was next and

then he was lying over Tom, naked and sticky with sweat. Tom wrapped him close and kissed his waiting mouth, lips bumping and tongues gliding. Yanking at the garter belt, Chris struggled to bare Tom's core.

"Don't tear it, Daddy," Tom cried, lifting his head and stilling Chris's hand. "Just the thong. Here."

But Chris was already bunching the material in both fists, veins in his arms jumping as he grunted and tore the material in two, the ripping sound loud between them. "I'll buy you more, baby," he said, catching Tom's small look of dismay. "In every color. In every style. Yours." He let the torn material hang limply off Tom's waist, and shaking as if he were a teenager himself, Chris stared down at his boy clad in only bra and stockings and garter belt. He was already so wet, pussy glistening, cock hard and leaking, nipples tight little peaks under the lace of his bra, chest flat and jumping with stilted, lovely breaths.

"I'm keeping what's left," he rasped, flicking the hanging black shreds of the thong.

Tom giggled. "You keep them all! I'll have nothing to wear soon enough."

"That's the plan."

"Wicked Daddy," Tom murmured, cupping Chris's head and running his fingers through his shorn hair to the back of his neck, pulling him closer for kisses. Hooking his arms under Tom's knees, Chris wrenched his legs up, bending him in half. Air rushed out of Tom's lungs in a quick exhale, but he grinned though breathless, accepting Chris's weight.

Driven by instinct and bone-deep familiarity with Tom's body, Chris aligned himself and pushed in, one solid thrust. Mouth parted, Tom's teeth glinted as he smiled and grabbed hold of Chris's buttocks.

"Do you remember, *hng*," he groaned, lifting his head as Chris slammed in again. Hooking his fingers over the middle stitching of the flimsy bra Tom wore, Chris took hold and tugged, hauling Tom toward him as he thrust forward. "Yes, Daddy! Yes. R-remember the prison? That first day?"

"Best day of my life," Chris groaned, snapping his hips. Heat so wet and snug, Tom's inner muscles tightened and gave tiny spasms as they groaned and wrapped their arms around each other, lips brushing.

"I remember the sun in your—." Tom gasped, eyes rolling back. "Your hair, Daddy. So pretty. I think I loved you even then."

"My sweet boy," Chris whispered. "I wanted you then, too. I couldn't stop thinking about you. Your scent whenever I walked out into the main room...it was all I could smell. This," he said, stabbing in again. "This sweet cunt. Hiding it from me."

"My mom told me never to tell—."

"You're not hers anymore," Chris interrupted, hands bracketing Tom's face. "You're not hers. You never were, in a way. Not when she gave you up because of her bullshit fear of what other people would say or think of her. You're mine now. My boy. My sweet, gentle girl. And I'll protect you."

"Daddy," Tom wept, pressing their lips together in a hard, hot kiss, sucking tongues and bumping teeth, all sweet devotion.

As Chris neared his orgasm, Tom could see the wet haze of fever in his eyes, cheeks flushed. Close to climax and close to rut, Chris's thrusts were frantic and rough, a spiral digging low in Tom's

belly. The silk stockings on his legs made keeping them wrapped around Chris's waist difficult, and he ended up locking his ankles behind his buttocks, pulling at him with both heels. Skin warm and slicked with clean sweat, Chris lapped with a determined tongue at each of Tom's nipples, tugging the tiny nubs between both lips, getting them red and peaked. Head tossed back, Tom moaned and exposed his neck, the long pale length of it like a siren to Chris, calling him to shore, the bigger waves beckoning and only moments away.

"Bite me," Tom breathed, lashes dancing. "Please bite me."

With a low snarl, Chris took Tom's jaw in one hand and held his head to the side, widening his jaw over the beating artery. He bit down and felt Tom's pulse spike at the touch. He flattened his tongue on the fevered skin, moaning to soothe, to calm his mate, hips pulsing hard. Salt bloomed in his mouth.

With a sharp intake of breath and the nip of teeth at his neck as trigger, Tom's orgasm collided over his mind and heart, arching his backbone, digging his nails into Chris's back, eyes scrunched at the wide blue arc of starry sky lit brightly in his head. He cried out into the warm bedroom, Chris ejaculating into him just after.

They lay breathing hard, Chris mussing his cheek into the bite mark, scenting him. Shaking and limp, Tom's legs fell to the bed.

"No knot, Daddy?" His lips quivered, blinking up at him, Chris's back an inked canvas of his blunt scratch marks.

"Don't...always knot," Chris gasped, out of breath. "Especially since...I'll be getting my rut any day. I'll knot you then. Trust me."

Tom giggled and rolled his hips, Chris's sticky skin staining him with lines of grease and sweat.

"Do you like it?" Tom asked, smoothing a hand down his legs.

"I wasn't lying," Chris laughed. "I was washing my hands when I got your text. My vision went all fucked. Staggered back against the wall. I couldn't believe it. And you shaved."

Tom laughed up at the ceiling, throat bobbing, white teeth flashing. Utterly delighted. Chris had never been so aware of the beat of his own heart, how it swelled, how it burst and staggered like the first steps of a newborn fawn.

"I did. In the shower. *Very carefully.*"

Chris hummed, the bruises under his eyes bleeding a faint lilac into his cheeks. He cupped Tom's sac. "Feels nice. With or without it. So soft."

Tom frowned, smoothing a finger over the thick arch of Chris's brow. "Daddy. You don't look well."

Chris squeezed his eyes shut, sweat spotting his nose. He pulled out of Tom, very gently, and flopped onto his back. He kept a firm hand on his wrist.

"I'm gonna get it. Soon."

Tom sat up, a bra strap falling off his shoulder. "Then we need to prepare, Daddy. We need food and water. What if we order pizza like last time? The food can come to us!"

“I don’t know about that, babe. If someone came to the door while I’m in rut, and they look at you and talk to you, I might go ballistic.”

“You’re very jealous in rut?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been mated. But I remember the spark of possession that would hit me when I rutted with girls years ago. And they weren’t mates. With you?” He shook his head. “I don’t know. And what if I refuse to leave your side? What if you answer the door and I’m with you and the situation is so plainly obvious, what if the person reports us? Alpha in rut with a minor?”

Tom blinked. Chris was right. “Cooking it is. You can tail me all you want in the house, Daddy. And I’ll make all the food. You said two days?”

Chris nodded.

“Then let’s go for groceries, and then home to get you showered and in bed, my old man.”

They stood from the bed with a groan, finding their clothes on the floor. Chris’s seed was sticky on Tom’s inner thighs, but he didn’t mind. He liked feeling it there. Very carefully, he unclipped the garter belt from the stockings, and then rolled them down to fold on the bed.

“Keep the bra on?” Chris said, shrugging into his own shirt. Tom grinned and nodded.

Out back, Chris uncovered an older Camaro, black with cream interior. His hand trailed the hood. “Haven’t driven her in six years. Checked her out just the other day. She sounds good.” They climbed in and Chris turned the engine, the loud purr of the car vibrating under the seats. For a Thursday night, the Walmart was full of people. Tom took a creaking cart and maneuvered through the aisles. Chris whispered to him that he could get whatever he thought they might need, so he bagged fruits and vegetables and uncooked chicken and steak. He got milk and orange juice and eggs and bread. Some pasta and sauce. Two boxes of cereal. Peanut butter and jelly. A tub of chocolate chip ice cream. Cheese and ham. He also got some cleaning supplies and a pair of yellow gloves, to give Chris’s house a thorough once-over.

There was something so blatantly domestic about walking up aisle after aisle with Chris trailing him, collecting food for them to make and eat together as a couple under one roof, that made Tom grin with relief and happiness. Here he was useful. Here with his Alpha, he was wanted and cherished, never shut down and never ignored. It was unlike anything Tom had ever felt before, and he wanted to hold onto that moment in the baking aisle for as long as he lived.

He scanned the rows of boxes. Brownies. Cupcakes. Sugar cookies. He wanted to try baking something, but he couldn’t make up his mind.

Chris hovered next to him, eyes darting at every person who drew too close. His hand was locked around Tom’s elbow, sweat dotting his brow whenever people – particularly men – excused themselves around them.

“Almost done, Daddy,” Tom murmured, peering at the instructions on one of the boxes.

Chris shuffled closer and dropped a kiss to Tom’s shoulder, moaning quietly, shortly, at the scent of him. Tom finally chose a cake mix and a cookie mix, thinking to try his hand at both, and then wheeled their cart to the front registers. Chris helped him load the conveyor belt with their groceries, keeping a narrowed eye on the cashier, a man of maybe twenty-five who smiled at Tom as he rang up their items. When he gave them their total, Chris pulled out a clip of cash from his wallet and handed the man a few bills.

Tom rubbed the small of his back, trying to draw his angry gaze away from the innocent cashier. Chris looked down at him and smiled, eyes softening.

“Have a great night,” the man said, smiling again at Tom. Chris leveled him with a frigid glare, but Tom was quick to grab the change and steer Chris toward the loaded cart.

“Thanks! You too.” He took Chris’s elbow. “Push, Daddy.”

Brow low, Chris took the cart and they wheeled out of the store. The parking lot was dotted with orbs of light from the lampposts scattered throughout, but the Camaro was half-obsured by a gnarled bush blanketed with white flowers. As soon as they were safe in the relative cover of darkness, Chris had Tom pushed up against the car, lips hard on each other. Big, warm hands slid under Tom’s shirt and along his narrow back, fingers curling over the lace band of his bra, right over where it hooked together.

“Daddy is jealous,” he breathed, holding his jaw up as Chris mouthed at his neck.

“That kid was making eyes at you.”

Tom laughed quietly, hands on Chris’s shoulders, sliding up the nape of his neck to grip at his long hair. “He was just friendly. Now help me get these groceries home so I can take care of you.”

Chris pulled back and kissed the tip of his nose. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Chris,” Tom whispered, standing on his tiptoes and brushing their lips together. Chris’s tattoos looked even more menacing in the half-dark, etched from both wrists and disappearing under his shirt sleeves. Tom rubbed his forearms with both hands, eyes following the other tattoo that curved in black arcs from behind his neck and ended in sharp points just under his jawline. They were visceral and dangerous, these markings of his criminal, his hero. And Tom was on his way to memorizing each and every one.

They loaded the car with the groceries and then Chris drove them back home, taking to the streets carefully, hand across the seat holding Tom’s wrist. They took turns walking to and from the car, carrying the bags inside. While Chris parked the Camaro out back, Tom stocked the fridge and pantry, humming as he bunched up the remaining bags to recycle later. Chris looked in bad shape when he came back in from outside, sweating into his shirt, the bruises under his eyes looking a bit darker. Tom thought it might be best to wait to clean until Chris was finished with his rut. Crowding him up against the counter now, Chris sniffed at Tom’s neck, rubbing his cheek over his throat and jaw, long fingers clenching slowly in his curls. His Daddy needed him now.

“It won’t be tonight,” Chris said roughly. “It always hits in the mornings. Tomorrow I think. Are you okay?”

Tom nodded fast. “Go ahead and shower, Daddy. I’ll fix us some sandwiches for tonight. And then I’ll shower before bed. Okay?”

“Kay, baby,” Chris murmured, shuffling out of the kitchen and down the hall. Tom hurried with the food, throwing four pieces of bacon onto a pan. While they sizzled, he sliced tomatoes and cut into the brand new head of lettuce, washing everything first in the sink. He toasted bread last and slathered some mayonnaise on each slice. With the ham, cheese, and bacon, Tom topped each sandwich off with lettuce and tomatoes.

The water on the other side of the wall shut off.

“Babe?” Chris called from the bedroom.

“Here!” Tom shouted back, poking his tongue out as he balanced the two plates on one forearm and holding one water in his hand, the other against his belly. Walking slowly down the hall, he got about halfway before Chris came out of the room, hair dripping.

“Oh, babe. Here.” He took a plate and a glass and together they sat on the bed and leaned back against the headboard.

Chris bit into his sandwich with a groan, jaw muscles clenching as he chewed enthusiastically. Tom smiled as he watched him, feeling a burst of pleasure in his chest as Chris ate.

“Thssogood,” Chris mumbled, leaning over and pecking Tom on the cheek. He swallowed down another bite. “So good. Thank you.” He gulped down the water, chest heaving when he was done. Tom handed him his own glass.

“Drink more, Daddy.”

Chris did, thanking him again. He collected the plates and disappeared into the kitchen while Tom showered. He was toweling his hair dry when he stepped back into the bedroom and saw Chris lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Hanging the towel on the doorknob, Tom padded over to him. He sat at Chris’s side with a leg folder under him. Touching his brow, Tom whispered, “Are you okay?”

Chris blinked, and took a breath. “It’s my first rut with a mate. With a bond. I don’t know why, but I’m nervous.” Sharp blue eyes flicked over to him. “Are you nervous?”

“A little. Yeah. But excited more than anything. Because I’ve always thought of being there for your rut since your letter about it at the prison.” He folded himself closer, and palmed Chris’s cheek. Chris’s hand landed warmly on his flank, staying put. “You won’t go through that alone again. I’m going to be with you this time. You won’t need anything, Daddy.”

Chris’s eyes had slowly closed, a shadow of pain flitting over his features. His rut in jail had truly been a terrible thing, Tom thought, whispering to him softly, petting his hair. All alone and without relief, heart pounding, the walls closing in on him as his yearns and cries went unanswered.

“Sleep now, Daddy,” Tom said, turning the lamp off and casting the room in darkness. He crawled over Chris and flopped onto the bed beside him. Chris immediately rolled and grabbed Tom up in a hug, burying his face in Tom’s neck, gusting out a warm, exhausted breath. He was asleep within moments, body relaxing heavily against Tom. They shared their weight equally, comfortably, and Tom eased into the pillow, smoothing a hand down the bare skin of Chris’s back.

Humming a soft tune, Tom nuzzled Chris’s hairline, the longer strands of blond tickling his lips. With his knee, he shimmied his leg between Chris’s thighs, pressing closer and twining them like a pretzel. Chris groaned and slid his leg higher on Tom’s thigh, anchoring his foot behind his kneecaps. Tom smiled into his hair, happiest when they were tangled together.

He slept eventually, sagging into the swallow of deep night, a pair of cooing turtledoves rustling beyond the window.

And throughout the growing dark, amid the beat of moonlight, Chris groaned softly, limb and muscle growing slowly hotter with every passing hour. He was burning, with flame and sun, molten in his core, burrowing for the only warmth that could match him.

Tom. Tom. Tom. Tom. Tom.

Mate.

Star-Crown

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

Chris jerked and landed on his back, drawing Tom over his chest. Both still sleeping, they murmured and settled again, sweat glistening on the long line of a spine, on the jutted point of a hipbone, behind the tender bend of knees and the soft skin of upper lips. Velvet felt of bare cheek, inked canvas bone and wheat stocks, breathing, breathing, breathing.

In and out. In and out. In and out.

Later on, Tom woke with a tiny moan, spilling sunlight crushing his vision. Lifting his head, he saw the spot of sweat beads left on Chris's sternum from where Tom had rested his head. Chris slept still, lashes fluttering, chest jumping with fast breaths. Hands clenched in the sheets and sporting a massive erection, Chris was on the verge of consciousness, moaning small and quiet.

His erection jumped, seeking.

A zip of delighted alarm sped through Tom. It was like watching a tiger sleep. Any moment Chris could spring up and grab him, and it made Tom buzz with anticipation. Still drowsy, he slowly crept out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom to relieve his bladder, brushing his teeth after with slow, even strokes before returning to bed. He curled up on his side away from Chris, seeking a cool spot on the sheets, and was asleep again within a minute. It was only a short while later that he felt a warm, trembling hand curve over his hip, a dip in the bed, a hot mouth on his shoulder.

"Daddy," he mumbled, and Chris groaned loudly, lips and teeth dragging down the slanted curve of neck to bite him there. Chills erupted on Tom's skin, making him blink, making him whisper. With a broad, rough swipe, he was flipped onto his back, a wide hand planted on his chest. Tom gasped and opened his legs on instinct, Chris settling between, heavy and immediate. A hard thrust down dragged their cocks together like bright sparks. Sudden consciousness made his vision swim, eyes widening on the ceiling, where the fan spun about in fast revolutions, whirring, whirring. A head of blond bobbed before him, eyes bright with fever, dark brows narrowed with desire, with pinpointed focus.

"Tom," Chris rasped, top lip lifting in a snarl, the sharp canine exposed. There was a distance in his eyes, a heady glaze that told Tom it had begun. Chris would be dragged down into it now, his body acting on pure instinct. To find Tom and mate.

And he's found me, Tom marveled, lashes quivering.

With a low growl, Chris reached low and took himself in hand, erection long and wide, thick at the base, head red and swollen.

"Tom," he whispered again and then thrust in hard, and deep. Mouth falling open in a shaky cry, Tom arched as they grappled for a moment, arms tightening, Chris devouring Tom with sight and tongue.

But then Chris's body jolted to a stop, every muscle straining. He blinked and shook his head, teeth clenched. "Tom. Shit."

"D-Daddy," Tom stammered, smoothing away the sweat on Chris's face. "What is it?"

Shaking, Chris whispered, "I don't want to hurt you."

"Chris, just let go. It's okay, Daddy. You can let go."

Chris's hips gave a stuttering jump, and they both moaned. He wasn't as deep as Tom could take him. He had a couple of inches left.

"I'll...I'll fuck you...hard, Tom. Very hard."

"I know, Chris. We talked about this. Remember?"

Chris whined low, pupils threatening to consume his entire irises.

Tom nodded. He cradled his face. "You can let go. I want you to."

With the last shred of his control holding himself back, Chris's shuddering limbs finally loosened with a sigh and then hardened immediately after. He drove his hips forward in one sudden lunge and Tom cried out. His entire length slid into Tom's core, a pulsing spike that spread Tom wide.

Chris hit home with a sharp stab, and he growled out a rugged curse, eyes gone dark.

Tom dug his blunt nails into Chris's back, feeling his inner walls begin to slicken as Chris started moving with more fervor. He rocked above him, teeth gritted, hair falling in long strands over the shorn part of his scalp. The pointed tattoos beneath his jaw expanded with every heaving breath, glazed eyes on Tom, who hugged his neck to keep him not an inch away.

Locking his ankles, Tom pulled Chris in for kisses, Chris snapping his hips, buttocks flexing. And they moved together, mouths bumping, sliding and wet, tongues darting out to flex and twine, a gentle suck to squeeze out yet another gasp, another cry from Tom. With one long arm wrapped under Tom's back, and his other hand pressed flat to his chest, Chris dominated and held him, breaths shared, bodies colliding in near violence.

Tom's cock flopped up and down, smacking between their bellies, his cunt angled up to receive Chris's thrusts. Tucked inside, the drag and pull of his cock made Tom pant, made his pelvis begin to tingle, and Tom was propelled to orgasm faster than ever before. Two thrusts later and he came, pussy contracting around Chris, lip curled again, sweat beading off his nose. Rising up on his knees, he rammed in as Tom spun apart and then pulled out fast, spreading Tom's legs.

His cock, standing proud and wet, finally gave two desperate jumps before it erupted with a jet of white. Dazed, Tom flinched as Chris's cum landed in thick ribbons on his face and neck, on his chest and belly, strings of the heavy cream pooling on his trembling chest. Chris collapsed forward on one hand, using the other to continue stroking his cock, even more cum pouring out. Tom was drenched with it, his own blood rising to the surface of his skin, making him buzz and tremble with adrenaline, with ecstasy. So sensitive, he felt of mist and cloud, of the tickle of butterfly wings, of sparrows' nests and crawling lady bugs. He felt of summer lightning and August rains, of the bite of static in the air, of the roiling clouds of every horizon of every storm.

"Fuck," he wheezed, managing air in his lungs. A drop of cum slipped between his lips, the lashes of his right eye caked with it. Tongue darting out, he tasted it and had but a short moment to moan before Chris was stuffing himself back inside and thrusting again. With pleasure still ripping

through him, Tom lay flat on his back, arms tossed above him, smiling up at Chris as he worked himself to yet another orgasm.

“Come, Daddy. Again. And again, please. Cover me with it. Fill me with it.”

Grunting, long fingers digging to bruise in the meat of his thighs, Chris plunged in, his sac slapping the tender cleft of his ass. The light shifted in the room as he worked him late into the morning, finally coming again with a knot and a gasp. He stoppered himself deep and groaned at the copious spill, eyes rolling back into his head.

Lying spent and thirsty, his own juices bubbling out, Tom panted and licked at his bottom lip, tongue dry in his mouth. He felt Chris shudder above him, felt it down into his core, through his own straining legs and up into his heart. Trailing his fingers up Chris’s chest, he curved them over his shoulders and tugged him low. Chris let himself fall forward, cradled to Tom’s chest as his knot swelled and fastened them together. Tom winced and shifted, carding his fingers into the buzzed hair, trailing the pad of his thumb along the curved tattoo, kissing Chris’s fevered brow.

Still Chris pulsed, sluggish and slowing, still he spilled, the prolonged orgasm wracking him with tremors. He whimpered and hid his face in Tom’s neck.

“It’s alright, Daddy. Rest now. ”

“Baby,” Chris whispered. He swallowed hard, the sound loud in the room. He nosed harder against Tom’s throat. “Tom.”

“I’m here, Chris. It’s me. We’re knotted now. We’ll rest and then I’ll get us some water.”

The knot wouldn’t loosen for another hour, at least. For now, he would hold Chris to him, smooth his sweating forehead, whisper to him his love. The bond felt deeper now. It felt stronger. It felt as a pulsing star in his ribcage would feel, warm and heavy and radiant.

Emotion crested and glowed in him. Of great claim. Of great possession and weighted truth. Of great love and trust, and a risen midday sun.

The first knot out of the way, Chris’s desperation waned as he dozed against Tom. It throbbed, like a slow heartbeat, sending small waves of pleasure through Tom as he felt cum trickle out of him. From what he could tell, Chris was only barely coherent during his ruts, as Tom had hardly been during his heats. He could speak his name and burn him with kisses, but his hips moved on primal instinct, finding Tom’s cunt and burying himself deep. He hadn’t been violent – rougher, yes – but not violent, not painful. Tom was positive the ruthless reputation alphas had acquired stemmed from their willingness to do almost anything to protect their omegas and mates. That included beatings – Jeff’s bloodied face flashed in Tom’s mind – and threats, even murder, from what Tom recalled from whispers he’d heard from classmates and adults he’d overhead in the next aisle over at the drug store. And he had started to understand why. The bond between an alpha and an omega was beyond dispute; it was a seed that took root in the very foundation of one’s DNA. A recognition based simply upon sight and scent, upon instinct. Tom was sure that if he concentrated hard enough, he would be able to tell if Chris had been hurt or was upset, or if he was happy beyond measure, even if they weren’t near each other.

It was an ink stain of a hundred thousand-year-old memory, etched and seeped into his heart, into his veins and brain synapses. He was Chris’s, and Chris was his. And no one would be able to state differently. It was unnatural, an offense to his being, to his very life.

Running a hand down Chris’s inked backbone, Tom reminded himself to make an appointment

with the school nurse once classes started again in September. He would need to register as an omega, but he planned on lying about being mated. If he was officially mated, they would want the information of his mate and that wouldn't be the best situation for him and Chris, who was twice his age and an ex-con.

No.

If he wasn't mated, then he would just be excused from school for the days he was in heat and then allowed to return when it passed. No harm done. By law there were no alphas on staff at the school. The threat they could present to students who were budding omegas was too dangerous. Tom would be able to register as an omega, but lie about being mated since there would be no alphas around to sniff his bond to Chris. It should work. At least until he turned eighteen. Or graduated.

"Tom?"

The rasp startled Tom and he jumped. He lifted his head.

"Chris?"

Shifting carefully, Chris cursed and braced up on his elbows. Tom was surprised to see his lower lip pinched red.

"Did I bite you?"

Tongue flicking out, Chris tasted the cut. "Must have. I like it."

"How are you feeling, Daddy?"

Wincing, Chris glanced down between their bodies. "Like I'm stuck to you with a star crown around my dick."

Tom laughed, tossing his head back. And then they both groaned when the knot pulsed in warning.

"Shh, stay still," Chris chuckled, cupping Tom's skull and petting his hair. "But I'm serious. It feels amazing. Better than I imagined. I'm still not really here. I'm up there somewhere," he said, gesturing to the ceiling. "Like there's stars on us. Like we're wrapped in stars."

"God, I love you," Tom breathed, lifting his chin and catching Chris's lips. Tongues parched and noses bumped, they smiled and laughed and rubbed their cheeks together, Chris's stubble making him squeal.

When his knot began to shrink, Chris held Tom's hips and slowly slipped out. Tom sensed his opening narrow in the absence of Chris's cock, but he still felt like he was gaping, a fluttering mouth empty of its prize. He closed his legs and moaned at the protesting muscles.

Chris was coherent for only the time being, rubbing his forehead, eyes still not quite focused.

Tom told him to stay put, that he would grab them water bottles and some fruit. But when Tom leaned back out from inside the fridge a minute later, Chris was suddenly there, all nearly six and a half feet of him.

He squeaked and fumbled the water bottles. Chris snatched his wrists.

"Are you okay?" he asked, eyes flicking over Tom's face. He looked slightly panicked.

“Yes, Daddy. I’m fine.”

“I didn’t want to leave you alone. As soon as you left I got nervous.”

Tom softened. It was his rut, that possessive, protective, and jealous flare amplified. He took Chris’s elbow and walked him to the kitchen table. “I’m perfectly fine. Nothing can hurt me here. I’m with you.”

Chris’s arm inched around Tom’s waist. “I don’t want you out of my sight.”

“I won’t be. I promise.”

“You promise, babe?”

“I promise, Daddy.” Tom sat him in one of the chairs and slowly unwrapped himself from Chris’s arms. He hurried back to the fridge and took out some fruit. It was a strange and extremely erotic thing to see Chris naked at the table, brow bunched over eyes trained on him across the room. He watched Tom’s every move, long fingers tapping an uneasy beat on the scarred wood. And as Tom lined up a banana and some strawberries to slice, he smiled at Chris from the counter, cheeks rosy, lips tender and neck bruised. Even now his seed slicked thick down his inner thighs, his hipbones tender with yet unseen bruises.

“Here now,” he said, putting the fruit in a bowl and taking it to Chris with two water bottles. Snagging a piece of banana, Tom plopped himself down on Chris’s lap and threw an arm around his shoulders, nuzzling that rugged cheek. Chris ignored the fruit, dragging a hand over Tom’s bare thigh.

“Eat something, Daddy,” Tom said. He uncapped the water bottle. “Or drink. Please?”

But Chris’s eyes had gone dark, fingers tightening on Tom’s waist.

Tom gulped, a heightened instinct of submission flooding his mind. “Chris?”

Chris didn’t answer.

Pupils wide, Chris lurched out of his chair and spun Tom around, pressing him face down on the table. The open water bottle tottered on its base and finally capsized, the liquid spilling under his cheek and over the edge of the table.

“Daddy,” Tom gasped, a fine mist spraying from his mouth. “Yes, yes, yes.” He widened his legs as Chris lined himself up, and keened as he pushed in, eyes squeezed shut, teeth gritted.

The stretch was exquisite, his fluttering cunt lips stretched wide and filled again with what he craved most. An immediate, heavy thrum started up inside his chest, a spike of arousal twisting behind his belly button. His cunt and cock felt so heavy, so filled with need, swelling, needing, beginning to drip.

“Daddy, yes,” he sobbed, one set of lashes soaked from the water, spittle flying between his lips. Chris planted a wide hand over the middle of his spine and started a hard rhythm, the wooden table creaking and sliding. Tom’s toes barely skimmed the floor, legs jerking as Chris pounded in.

Even though Tom’s body throbbed, his arousal a tight, hot wire in his gut, this was purely for Chris’s benefit, a thought that had his blood singing with pleasure and purpose. He smiled into the scarred wood of the tabletop, slowly reaching his arms down and back. And just as he hoped, Chris snatched both his wrists in hand and held Tom immobile, fucking into him at a deeper angle than

before.

Tom grunted as his spine went rigid, head lifting to face the wall. Water dripped down his jaw and sluiced in thick veins along his neck, pooling by his belly. He rocked hard, hipbones smarting, his cries soft and shallow, little sounds that seemed to goad Chris on, ramming in harder, fisting Tom's hair, gnawing at his neck. He bit down and moaned, hips stilling as he came once more.

And he knotted. Thickly.

Legs shaking, Tom lay quietly on the table, Chris's heavy weight draped over his back. Teeth digging just a tiny bit deeper, Chris finally pulled back and started lapping at the bite, kissing it softly.

"Tom?"

Tom blinked slowly. He was shaking, he was so hard. "Yes, Daddy?"

Staying quiet, Chris straightened from his hunch and pulled Tom up with him. Limp-limbed, Tom went without a fuss, head lolling on Chris's shoulder as the knot stayed snug inside him. Warm lips bunched at his ear, taking his earlobe and nibbling. Tom whimpered and jerked, but Chris's arm over his chest held him still. And then he was wrapping one calloused hand around Tom's cock and tugging.

Tom cried out, broken and raw, fingers clawed in the air.

"Come for me," Chris growled in his ear. "Come for me, Tom. Be a good girl and come."

"Fuck," Tom choked. "Daddy—."

The knot started to pulse, swelling and waning in short bursts. Chris's hand worked tight circle pumps on his cock, and Tom's orgasm avalanched his senses in one quick rumble.

His hearing snuffed out like a rain-spattered wick, a tiny ringing echoing from somewhere. The tips of his fingers buzzed, spread wide in the air. His eyesight fogged and he caught only glimpses of the ceiling, straight strands of blond hair bobbing in his periphery.

He mumbled something about lightning and sparks on his skin, and then felt the world tilt on its axis. Cradling him against his chest, Chris slowly sank to his knees, collapsing back against the wall by the counter, both breathing hard. Stuck together, their legs splayed out on the scuffed tile, they panted and blinked drowsily at the ceiling, little smiles growing on their faces.

"What is," Tom said quietly, drawing a deep breath, "what is your happiest memory?"

Cupping Tom's neck, Chris kissed along the other side, believing at one time that he would never know such happiness as he did that very instant. He swam in it, the clear waters that were Tom's eyes, his mate.

"Your letter to me at the prison," he said finally. "Just after my rut, when you told me you wanted me to claim you." He chuckled softly. "I almost clawed through the twenty feet of cement blocks and steel and barbed wire that fucking second."

Tom hummed a short laugh. Heads up at the ceiling, their cheeks pressed together, Tom was convinced he was living his happiest moment just then.

"What is your biggest fear?" Chris said softly, turning his head so that his lips brushed the soft

shell of Tom's ear.

"Losing you," Tom said quickly, honestly. "I've thought about it ever since Isabel mentioned losing her alpha to a car accident."

"Babe." The silence stretched a beat and when Tom refused to meet his eyes, Chris took his chin and brought it low. Tom's eyes were wet. "Babe. I'll be damned before someone takes me from you. I'm not going easy."

"It's just so sad," Tom said, tears pricking his eyes. "That our bond would be broken so easily. This warmth I feel in my chest where you now belong. I can't imagine it will ever go away. And I don't want it to!"

"It won't be easy, Tom," Chris whispered. "It would be death."

"No, Daddy." He breathed out, so afraid. "Don't, please."

Chris cuddled him close, careful with the knot between them. "Baby, no. Don't cry. I won't let anything happen. That won't happen to us, Tom. It won't. There are so many alphas and omegas that live long happy lives together. We are each other's first bonded mates. It will stay that way."

"Yes, Daddy. I want that."

They kissed hurriedly, moaning into each other's mouths, necks arching to reach at that angle.

Arms straining, Tom dragged the bowl of fruit and the one remaining water bottle toward them from the tabletop. They drank it down and fed each other fruit, Tom giggling when Chris blew a sticky raspberry on his neck. The knot eventually shrank and Chris helped Tom rise on legs shaky as a colt's. A flood of cum spilled between Tom's thighs – a sticky surge of white – and he giggled down at himself, elated. Groaning at their soreness, they found more water bottles in the fridge and drank greedily again before retreating to the bedroom before the next wave overtook them.

And it did, aggressively.

In total, there were nineteen more knots before the end of the second day. Throughout, they dozed and spoke quietly, interrupted only when something shuttered closed behind Chris's eyes and he would rise up above Tom to thrust his cock deep. And how they fucked, Tom was amazed and electrified to experience. Every single moment with Chris was one of safety and acceptance, but Tom found he really enjoyed the sense of vulnerability some of the positions gave him. When Chris fucked him like a dog and his neck bounced and his vision stilted and he could barely graze the bedsheets from the grip Chris had in his hair. Or when Chris would fold him clean in half, the tops of his thighs pressed to his chest jumping with the tiniest gasps, when Chris's weight made him breathless and dizzy, when Tom was squeezed hard into the blankets with Chris curved around the whole of him, the violent slap of their flesh like a song for his whines and Chris's grunts. With every knot Chris faded a little more, mumbling over Tom's neck, biting with no strength, moaning his name as he flexed his hips weakly.

Overheated and trembling, Tom could only lay wheezing once it was over, sight blurry on the blue-blanketed window. Inner thighs chafed, every muscle tender and aching, exhaustion clouded his mind. Chris was in worse shape. He was visibly defeated, as if nearly two dozen orgasms in two days was the worst a man could experience. But it was taxing, nevertheless. Every time his body knotted Tom, he lost precious fluids, and the times they drank what little water they could were never enough. They hardly ate, chewing only on more fruit, stumbling down the hall only to fuck on the counter, again on the table, the sofa and living room floor. Twice in the hallway. Once in

the bathroom, Chris refusing to leave Tom's side for even a second. And from Tom's core gushed a never ending stream of cum, like rivulets of milk on his skin, beading on the hairs of his legs. Part of Chris's goal - however instinctually managed - was to cover Tom in his scent. With cum and saliva, with teeth marks and skin rasps, with kisses and bone-crunching embraces, nuzzling his hair and rubbing his cheek on every inch of him, Chris was determined to suffuse Tom with himself. And based on the pleased hum he gave as he sniffed at Tom's armpit, just before collapsing back on the bed for the final time, it had worked.

Legs useless to him, Tom lay there with his shattered sleep pattern and his many bruises, grinning at the window. With a wince, he turned to face Chris. Head tucked under his arm, one hand wrapped around Tom's wrist, Chris was snoring quietly, his own pelvis and belly cum-splattered and beginning to bruise.

"Daddy," he whispered. His skin pulled tight. Chris had more than once come on his face and chest, white flakes drifting to the bed. He probably looked matted and thoroughly fucked. It was a good thing, he mused, that he could only become pregnant during his heats, because with how Chris ejaculated it was more than likely he would be pregnant year-round.

Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Daddy."

Chris moaned, but didn't lift his head.

"Daddy, we need water. And I can't walk." The water bottles they'd brought to the room were littered about, woefully empty. He squirmed a bit. "And I have to piss."

"You can just go here, babe. The sheets and everything are ruined anyway."

"Daddy, no!" Tom cried, horrified. "Daddy. Please. I have to pee. Carry me there?" He cupped Chris's head and smoothed his hair, whining low. Chris finally roused and pushed up with a heave, eyes bloodshot, the skin just beneath still bruised.

"Alright, alright. My princess needs to go." He sniffed at Tom's hairline and chuckled, muttering something about being 'covered with it'.

Tom grinned and held his arms up as Chris scooped him into the air. He groaned and tottered for a moment, both immeasurably exhausted. Tom blinked around the bleary room as Chris regained his balance - things were, indeed, destroyed. The mattress was angled half off the bed frame, the lamp had somehow been knocked over and was lying on its side. Blankets and sheets were balled up on the floor, and a pair of Tom's panties peeked out from under the closet door, absurdly. Chris stood still as they took in the damage, half wondering what the rest of the house looked like. But Tom was soon set before the toilet and then moaning in pleasurable relief as he emptied his bladder with a sway. Chris kept an arm around him for balance, kissing his shoulder sweetly. Tom hummed. Shoulder kisses were one of his favorite.

"Thank you, Daddy," he whispered, lifting his chin for another kiss, the most natural act in the world now. Legs like jelly, he leaned into Chris, tucking his head into the crook of his neck until he was finished.

"How about I put you in the bath and I clean up a bit?" Tom nodded sleepily. He leaned gingerly against the bathroom wall while Chris filled the tub.

Water gushed from the faucet and he watched Chris watching him, all long torso and swell of muscles, the ink of his skin like thunder clouds on a pale dawn sky. First, the tips of his fingers danced over Tom's chin, trailing low to the soft but firm underside of his jaw. Tom's breath

caught, flicking his eyes up at Chris, who was riveted by the bruised pink of his lips, all the beard burn on cheeks and chest. Widening his hand, he spread it over the front of Tom's throat and squeezed lightly as he bent and pressed their mouths together in a soft kiss.

Tom moaned, trembling like a leaf, his knees about to give out.

"I love you," Chris whispered, and Tom's legs buckled. But Chris caught him up fast, laughing gently at how his boy blushed and sputtered.

"Water? Food? Anything else, babe?" Chris asked after lowering him into the tub.

"And you. Please come back."

"I will. Just rest for now. I'll help you out in a bit."

Lazing back along the porcelain, Tom hummed as he washed himself. He scrubbed at his elbows and knees, passing a cautious hand between his legs and wincing at the aching sting. His neck was next, smoothing bubbly suds over the new bites and bruises Chris had left. Tom would need to be careful with hiding them from his mother. Finally, he finished with his hair, lathering it with shampoo and then dunking down under the surface to rinse it. Through the wall, he could hear Chris bumping around in the bedroom and further in the house by the kitchen and living room. When he came back in for Tom, he helped him dry off and then walked him to the bed, now back against the wall with fresh sheets. Tom curled up against the pillows and heard Chris start up the shower.

He fell into sleep easily, content in the fact that it was Sunday and he could technically return home in a day or two. Vaguely, he felt soft kisses behind his ear, a hand slide down his naked thigh, though he couldn't wake, only moaning quietly and digging deeper into the pillow. Hours may have passed, but the house was unnervingly quiet when he blinked his eyes open, glued shut with the residue of sleep. Rubbing them blindly, he looked around the room, finding it empty. Cocking his head, he heard nothing of Chris's presence.

"Daddy?" No answer. Tom's heart started beating fast. "Chris?"

Maybe he was outside in the garage. Rolling to the edge of the bed, he tried standing but collapsed back, his legs completely boneless and still trembling with fatigue. Something crumpled under his hand just as he was about to panic, and he glanced down. It was a note.

"Went to the store for something. Be back soon. I love that you smell like me."

Laughing, Tom folded the note in half and put it on the bedside table. So his rut was truly ended. Chris would never have left the house without him, would have even insisted they never leave. When Chris finally did return, Tom was wrapped up in the new sheets watching a show on Mexican cooking.

"I'm hungry," he announced.

"I brought pizza from Grimaldi's."

"Yay! Thank you. Because I don't think I can cook anything today."

Chris ruffled his hair. "That's why I brought it. My kitten is wiped out."

"What'd you leave for?"

“I went to get us something.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose. “A gift?”

“I think so. I think you’ll like it.”

“Can I see, Daddy?”

“First we eat. Wanna stay in here?”

Tom nodded, and Chris went to get the pizza and some more water.

The pizza was still warm, ricotta cheese dripping off the edges, pockmarked with Italian sausage and green peppers. With kisses in between bites, they both ended up greasy-faced and grinning. They washed their faces in the bathroom and then Chris laid out two towels on the bed. He guided Tom to the middle of it, and Tom sat straight, waiting.

“Close your eyes,” Chris said, turning the TV off. Tom obeyed. In his ear he heard very softly, “Now lie back.” A hand pressed evenly at his chest and Tom let himself sink against the pillows. It still amazed him that before Chris, no one had ever seen him naked. Now, it was rare to be clothed around his alpha, spending most of their time in private so at ease with each other that clothes were often optional.

Despite his ease and comfort in Chris’s presence, this new game had his stomach nervously flutter, biting his lower lip as Chris’s hand drifted down his chest and palmed his belly, staying put.

“Easy now,” Chris whispered, sniffing along his temple and patting his ribs. Tickled, Tom giggled and then fell silent. He heard Chris uncap something, the sound popping like plastic, and then an audible squirt.

Tom’s fingers curled in the scratchy towel. “What is it, Daddy?”

“Don’t open your eyes,” Chris said, a smile in his voice. He rubbed his hands together, the sound like wet sandpaper in Tom’s ears. He jolted when Chris pressed both palms to his chest, significantly warmer and slicked with something.

“Daddy, what is it?”

“It’s lube, babe. It’ll help you relax.”

Keeping his eyes closed, Tom arched his spine as Chris dragged his hands low to his belly, staining his skin with the slippery lubrication.

“Strawberries. And so warm,” Tom murmured, already feeling his head begin to swim. His skin started humming. “Oh! And it tingles.”

Chris chuckled and pulled his hands away for a moment. Drizzling more on Tom’s belly, he dipped his fingers in and rubbed his palms together again. Over both shoulders and down over his thin biceps, he massaged and kneaded, eyes intent on Tom’s face, the furrowed brows, the bitten lip, the tiny moans bubbling from his throat. Each wrist, each finger, he massaged every joint, every dip of bone and sinew, running his hands back up to Tom’s neck and circling it gently. How trusting Tom was, how loving. He bent his head back and let Chris run both long thumbs over the bump of his Adam’s apple, his long fingers wrapping around the back and bumping along the top of his spine. His skin was dark with bruises from Chris’s rut, but pressure on them only seemed to

please Tom, whose small fists tightened on the towel, hips lifting from the bed. He was visibly hard, his cock a stripe of red over his pelvis.

“Harder,” he breathed when Chris swept down to his thighs. Digging into the muscles, Chris felt a sweat break out at hearing Tom moan, the room a little warmer because of the sunlight filtering in through the blanket-shrouded window. He concentrated on each leg, his fingers stroking down the outer thigh and then sweeping back in and up the inner thigh. Tom’s chest was jumping with tiny gasps, clearly wanting Chris to touch his cock, but he ignored it for now. In a quick swoop he dragged his fingers up to the hipbones and down his flat belly, avoiding his cock and creased balls. His pussy, however, he did focus on.

Smooth with pink, plump lips, Tom’s cunt was hairless and folded in tightly. Fingers slicked with lube, Chris separated Tom’s legs and then knelt between them. He bracketed both hands on the crook of each leg and used his thumbs to glide up along the outer lips. His slit was moist already, parting stickily for a peek of pink clit.

Chris couldn’t help the small groan he gave as Tom’s cunt slid closed again, sealing the sensitive nub and darker opening just within. When he glanced up at Tom, he saw that Tom’s eyes were open but lidded heavily, lashes low on his cheeks. They held eye contact as Chris swept his fingers down again, massaging into the crook of each leg and back up, giving the soft skin of his perineum a rub so gentle it had Tom’s eyes closing again.

Each knee and tender calf, each ankle and foot, all ten of his soft toes, Chris paid worship, leaving him oiled and tingling and whimpering.

“Turn over,” he whispered, his own rough rasp surprising him. In stilted shifts Tom turned over, leaving his cock pressed flat beneath his belly. But Chris lifted his hips and tugged his cock so that it lay pointing straight down to his feet. Tom huffed and buried his face in the crook of his elbow. Starting at his shoulders and the nape of his neck, Chris pressed and rubbed, Tom’s muscles slowly relaxing until he lay limply and half-asleep, his erection a straining, leaking, pulsing thing that drew Chris’s eyes every few seconds.

Kneeling on one side of Tom’s body, right at hip level, Chris turned toward the foot of the bed and leaned low over Tom’s buttocks. More oil, more shine on that plump flesh, he greatly enjoyed the bounce and pull of each pale globe. Sinking further between Tom’s legs, he dipped his fingers along his pussy lips and then dragged them back up, Tom lifting his hips with a moan, following the tug of Chris’s hands. He dipped and pulled, dipped and pulled, Tom’s pussy so wet now with lube and his own personal juices, bubbling from him with every pass of Chris’s hands. His pale thighs trembled, hips rocking as he sought Chris’s touch.

“Daddy,” he moaned, small voice hidden under his arms.

Mouth dry, Chris hoisted Tom’s hips up so that he rested on both knees. Tom tossed a nervous glance over his shoulders at him, and Chris winked, running a soothing hand over the small of his back. Taking his own cock in hand, he ran the tip over the slicked folds of Tom’s cunt and up over his other hole, letting it press snugly before drifting further up. He took Tom’s hips and slid his cock between his firm buttocks, the valley between them so slick and warm. Pumping his hips, he let their skin slap together, faking a good hard fuck, yanking Tom back as he pushed forward. To make the space tighter, he held his thumb over the shaft, keeping up his pace. It was almost real, and it was perfect.

“Daddy...please.” Tom’s eyes, when he looked back at him, were glazed with need. “Chris—please.”

Unable to resist any longer, Chris quickly flipped Tom to his back again and then scooted between his legs, Tom's cock once again lying in a red, shiny curve on his belly. Squirting a generous amount of lube in one palm, he angled Tom's legs up over his chest so that he lay bent in half, keeping them in place with one long arm. Under his balls Tom's pussy gleamed, swollen and pink with need. Giving in to his urge now, Chris bent low and sealed his mouth over where he knew Tom's clit lay hidden, his tongue delving between the spreading lips and into his heat. With his other hand, he brushed his thumb over Tom's furred hole, so smooth and tiny. How would he ever fit?

"Oh, yeah. Chris, yes. I've wanted you to."

Chris blinked up at him, sharpening his gaze. Between the narrow space of his bent legs, Tom reddened and arched his spine, squeezing his own nipples. Sucking at his clit, Chris moaned and worked his tongue deeper, tasting Tom's juices and the strawberry flavor of the lube. He tried a gentle pressure on Tom's other hole, feeling the skin give only slightly. Determined, Chris massaged it lightly, letting the smooth pad of his thumb and the lube work together to soften the muscle and allow a breach of finger.

Writhing, legs trembling, Tom cursed softly, so sweetly, as Chris dug in deeper with his tongue, stroking up his slit and down, turning his head to suck gently at the lips, pulling them into his mouth and using his teeth to pinch lightly. Tom gasped and tilted his hips, grinding his pussy harder on Chris's face.

"Will you hold your legs back, babe?"

Tom nodded crossed his arms under his thighs, squeezing his legs to his chest.

Holding his thumb to Tom's hole, Chris flicked his tongue over Tom's pulsing nub and slowly sank two fingers into his cunt. Tom tightened immediately, mouth parting with a mewl. Pumping his fingers, Chris angled his wrist and Tom gasped, his entire body loosening with a sigh.

Chris switched from thumb to forefinger and shoved past the furred muscle of his hole, the heat there just as sudden, just as wonderful. Tom's eyes flew open and he keened, spine lifting from the bed with a cry. Chris felt his cunt contract, the pulses starting deep within, squeezing his fingers in both holes as he shuddered through his orgasm. He moaned Chris's name, legs falling to the side, unable to hold them any longer, a slip of a tear glistening down his temple.

Slipping his finger out, Chris wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and crawled back up to straddle Tom's hips. He sat there, heavily, as he worked himself to a weak, tingling orgasm. Only able to spill but a trickle on Tom's belly, it nevertheless numbed his brain with a static fuzz, spine shuddering with a sob. He smeared what he could, collapsing over Tom to lie flat on him.

"You will smell like me always, if it's the last thing I do," he whispered, and Tom giggled sleepily, his pale feet flipping happily under the sheets.

The Gentling

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

With various aches and bone-numbing exhaustion, they spent the rest of the two days mostly in bed. Chris did order pizza and brought it to the bedroom, where they lounged and fed off each other's slices. They slept in a loose twist, and lay awake in more or less the same state, the TV background noise as they felt each other's bodies with no sexual intent. All exploration and fascination and worship, studying crooks and curves and counting freckles and grazing stubble and teasing squeezes. And kissing, above all. Tom knew that they probably wouldn't be able to see each other again until the following weekend so he woke up Tuesday morning with the intention of cleaning. Chris hadn't done much with his house since getting released, and it was filthy in ways that made Tom's skin crawl if he looked too closely. With the supplies Chris had bought during their grocery run, he left Chris in bed and set about cleaning out the cupboards, washing all of Chris's dusty pots and pans and various plates and mismatched glasses. He scrubbed every inch of the guest and master bathrooms, and emptied out the ashtrays and swept out the porch of dead leaves and stray cigarette butts. Piling up the Playboys and the TV Guides under the lamp table in the corner, he took the opportunity to glance inside the glossy pages of the latter, face reddening at the sight of all the pussies shaved clean, the women staring at the camera, legs splayed wide and inviting. His pussy had always been hairless, but now Tom wondered if he should shave his balls more frequently, too. Yet, he felt lazy about all the trouble. He did it for the picture he sent him a while back, but if Chris wanted him to, he would.

Lastly, he lit a candle by the kitchen window before starting on an early lunch. He'd always loved spaghetti, and wanted to make that with a salad and some buttered toast. Chris lumbered in after a while, eyes swollen and rubbing the back of his head, a sleepy gesture Tom loved instantly.

He came over and leaned over the back of Tom with a huff. "You weren't there and I thought I'd dreamt you. That you were home and I needed to go to work. Oh, shit. I should call my boss." Tom laughed as Chris went to go find his phone. They ate on the kitchen table, Tom wearing only a pair of Chris's boxer shorts, falling loose around his hips. Afterward, they showered, shuffling around each other for soap and shampoo, applying one for the other, their kisses sweet and soft in between.

"I don't want to go," Tom said as he packed his bag.

"Someday, you'll live here and no one can tell you otherwise."

Tom grinned. "Not even you?"

"Fuck no. I'll put the deed in your name."

"Sweet Daddy," Tom whispered, reaching over his bags to kiss Chris's lips.

After Chris dropped him off back at his house, Tom left a note for his mom in the kitchen that he was home from his 'trip'. Jeff was gone for the moment, so Tom took his time walking around, soaking in what no longer felt like his own anymore. Everything, from the walls to the sofas to the carpet, had become infused with Jeff's nicotine stain. Not to mention the evidence of his existence

around every corner: the blackened rims of the full ashtrays, the pile of dirty laundry on the washing machine, a purple satin tie draped over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. Tom found the rag so revoltingly intimate that his stomach turned and he fled to his room. Jeff disgusted him, there was no way around it.

According to his calendar, he would probably have one more heat before school started in September, and Chris would have his next rut several weeks after that. They still weren't set in their schedules, their cycles only just beginning to form around the recognition of the other. If they continued on this path, with the many weeks between their heats and ruts, eventually they would collide in a synchronized phase. Like two revolving stars attracted to a magnetized center, their revolutions becoming tighter and tighter until they finally burst in one giant explosion.

Such would be their joined heat/rut, metaphorically and hopefully physically. Although, Tom was rather worried about the state of their mental and bodily health if they would both be so entrenched in their needs.

He wouldn't worry about that now. There was still some time before school, and before that meeting he had to set up with the school nurse. It made him nervous, thinking about that talk. Even if there were no alphas around to smell his dishonesty, lying had never come easily to him and he would need to think about what he would say to her and hope his face didn't betray him. For now, he would enjoy the time he spent with Chris, running away together for their small hours of privacy on the weekends or sometimes even after Chris got out of work. But they texted the most when they were apart, and Tom was in a way reminded of the letters they exchanged when Chris was in prison. It was fun trying to discern the small little nuances in Chris's texts, the flirtations and the sexual aggression, the sweet coddling and the gentle concern and interest Chris showed for Tom's life. It was obvious to Tom that Chris wanted him permanently under his roof, and the thought drove him mad with exhilaration. It was such a lovely feeling being wanted. He was starting to feel distinctly unwanted in his mother's own house.

She'd vaguely asked him about his trip, fingering through the mail, her hair in a knotted mess on her head. And as he started telling her about it – fully prepared with made-up details about what he and his friend had done – Jeff had walked in and Tom excused himself. He doubted she had even heard half of what he'd said, turning to Jeff fast and hugging him tightly.

For a long time Tom had wondered if his mother's reserve with him had to do with his possession of both a penis and a vagina. It made her uncomfortable, he knew this. But it wasn't her concern anymore. Tom's body was his own, and upon his acquaintance with Chris he'd started to become more familiar with the body part he had been told all his life to keep a shameful secret. He realized, with vivid clarity and quiet pride, that he really liked his cunt and cock, and that his mother's approval was starting not to matter anymore, even if her lack of affection or awareness of him still stung.

No, Tom was beginning to wonder if it might be about his father. According to his mom, his father had left before he found out she was pregnant with Tom.

"No good, son-of-a-bitch," he'd often heard her mutter when she rifled through accumulated bills before the Era of Jeff.

Tom wondered if he looked like his father. He liked to tell himself, late at night when he felt loneliest, that if his father had known about him he would have stayed, and he would have loved Tom the most.

Whenever Tom managed to extricate himself to Chris's house, they spent most of their days in bed, Chris a groaning lump of laughing fatigue and Tom a giggling pouncing cat. Eating, watching

movies, sleeping, they were never more than a foot away from each other, pressed especially tight at night and on Chris's bikes, riding around the steadily cooling streets of their desert city, Chris often parking in some isolated clump of arid land and fucking Tom over the leather seat of his Harley. The monsoons started early August, and they often sat by the front window as the sky opened up with torrents of rain, roiling with massive dark clouds, the desert air cleansed, cactus spines the color of bones dripping eternally. The lightning and thunder were always loudest in the early evenings. With every strike and blow and deluge, Tom would jump and hide under Chris's armpit, laughing as the scent of creosote bush wafted in from the cracked window.

There were a couple more parties with the bike crew and even a few sleep-overs at Jake Harper's, the guy who hosted the bonfires. Strapping a single sleeping bag and blankets and a pillow to the back of the bike, they would join the others around the simmering smaller flames and camp out under the stars. The nights were colder that late in the summer and lying rolled together in the bag created their small bubble of warmth, Tom snuggled into Chris's side.

The only bad part of these sleep-overs was that Mick hovered and watched, often masking his interest with jokes and good-natured shoulder pats. But Tom learned not to stand too close to him, often keeping just a step behind Chris, or else under his arm, the only safe distance that kept Mick at bay.

But it wouldn't stop Tom from his cuddles and his whispers to Chris under the stars, the others scattered and murmuring amongst themselves, too. He loved the camp outs, the wood smoke and the camaraderie, more of Chris's friends approaching Tom, even the girls inviting him to dance and talking to him about 'girl stuff'. And he loved the way Chris would look at him, the soft stares across the firelight, lit cigarette in his mouth.

Isabel was fast becoming someone Tom loved dearly. She was like a strike of match flame in the dark. A spark of light. A burning, a warmth. She had the loveliest brown eyes and her lips were always stained deep red. When Tom finally gathered the courage to ask her what color it was, she took his wrist and pulled him into the house and they stood before the bathroom mirror trying it on. With soft whispers and a helpful touch, she showed him how to hold the lipstick and the best way to purse his lips. When Chris came looking for him, Tom pulled open the bathroom door and planted a giant smooch on his cheek, leaving a mark in the shape of a red bow-heart. Chris had quietly excused themselves from Isabel and dragged Tom into a side room, where Tom planted kiss after kiss all over Chris's face, decorating him like a polka-dotted scarf. Even though they washed off the marks – after a photo on Tom's phone – Tom still spied one behind Chris's ear that he managed to smooth away with the pad of his thumb, winking at Chris with a blush.

Tom loved it best when he would wake in the mornings to find Chris hard but still asleep. Nosing around the root of Chris's cock, Tom would inhale him deep before straddling his waist and sliding down onto his cock with a gasp. He would already be moving by the time Chris woke up, skin slapping loudly, hands braced on his chest as he laughed and booped Chris's nose. Other times, Tom would take him in his mouth, moaning around the hard length, eyes on Chris, who would stir and startle awake, Tom's name on his lips. It was a delight, this magnificent power he was discovering in himself. Having lain dormant for years, his unabashed curiosity about Chris's body and all that they could make each other feel through touch and emotion was suddenly an intoxicating thing that he could never get enough of.

His mother's house was starting to feel like a tomb, only a temporary stop between his return to Chris's small adobe home. She was working more shifts, hardly ever there, and Jeff was a fizzing ball of hate, watching him from around corners, from behind the living room curtains as Tom hopped off Chris's bike most nights. His nose had healed, albeit somewhat crookedly, but his arm was kept in a tight wrap against his side, the break having been a bad one. He still drank heavily

and Tom still felt afraid of him, despite having so far obeyed Chris's threat to leave Tom alone.

Chris was leaving more bruises on his body, his hips and inner thighs and neck darkened with finger marks and hickeys and bites. A particularly mottled bruise was forming purple on his collarbone and Tom did his best to hide it, easy enough under his sweaters and jackets he donned for the wet weather and cool nights. But the inside of his mother's house was warm, and so one evening he walked out of his room for water wearing only basketball shorts and a loose T-shirt. He was just about to close the door to his room again when the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and he froze.

"You're a whore," he heard behind him, and he turned, glass clutched tightly in his fingers.

Jeff stood at the start of the hall, a glass of something dark and amber in his hand. His eyes were shot, red-rimmed and glassy and he swayed slightly. Even from that short distance, Tom could smell the booze on him.

"What?" Tom gasped, voice a whisper.

"You heard me, *whore*. Think I don't see the evidence of your heinous sin? That mark of his blooming on your neck. Little slut, ass up in the air for him. You let him fuck you and buy you things. That makes you a whore." He took a long swallow of the dark liquid and then his face went slack, as if struck with a sudden thought. Suddenly, it screwed up in rage and he angled his arm back.

Tom had just enough time to spin and sprint into his room before something burst on the wall behind him, a constellation of broken glass and brown liquor. His own glass of water was rolling on the floor, spilled.

He slammed his door shut and locked it, and was trying to stuff his feet into a pair of old sneakers when Jeff started banging on the weak wood.

"Open the fucking door, Tom. You let that thug fuck you and don't want me to even *look* at you? You're a fucking bitch! A cold-hearted little shit! Open the door!"

Tom stumbled in his haste, heart racing in fright, and was barely inching his window up when his bedroom door crashed open. Splinters of wood flew everywhere and he cried out, ducking and looking back. The hate distorting Jeff's face seemed unreal, a visceral dramatization of a human emotion, but there was nothing fake about it and that's what scared Tom the most. Jeff would murder him and rape his dead body if he couldn't force himself on Tom before he killed him.

Jeff crossed the room and Tom hurried to scramble over the window ledge, but a hand grabbed his calf and hauled him halfway back in. He yelled, but Jeff released his leg and clamped a hand over his mouth, dragging Tom's body against his and further away from his only exit.

"Shut your whore mouth. Get back in here and take my dick, you filthy cunt."

No! Tom struggled, Jeff's hand on his face like a vise. Mind frantic, he was able to lift his leg and knee Jeff in the groin, putting all of his weight into bending Jeff's injured arm back. Jeff roared in pain and it was enough for Tom to slip loose, crawling through the window.

Just when he thought he was free, a burning pain lanced up his leg, a jagged spike of fire. He screamed.

Jeff had slammed the window down on Tom's ankle, blood gushing from a big cut right over his bone. He fell out and landed on his side in the graveled dirt, the air and ground a cold shock to his

body. But he didn't hesitate. Sobbing, he got to his feet and limped to his bike, which he kept leaning against the wall just outside his bedroom window.

He jumped on and started pedaling, pain shooting to his knee with every push.

"Wait!" he heard, and glanced back. Jeff was leaning out his window, eyes wide with panic. "Tom! Where are you going? Wait, please. I'm sorry!"

But Tom kept pedaling, zooming down the street. He'd been unable to grab his phone before running away, but at least it was safe under his mattress, on silent. Unless Jeff trashed his room, Tom would be able to recover it the next day. And he doubted Jeff would do anything to his stuff. The fear in his voice meant he knew exactly where Tom was headed, and to whom.

It was slow going, maneuvering through the streets and toward the outskirts of town. Blood trailed behind him and made his shoe squish wetly every time he pressed down on the pedal. He tried to keep his bike steady, tears blurring his vision. There were no street lights this far away from his house, and the night started to creep in on him with no light source. The moon was a sliver and the stars could only do so much. The dark and the yawning sky set his teeth to chattering. His limbs became stiff with shock, sobs tearing from his throat. He could feel it, his heart. It was a war drum in his chest, fast and faster, blood pumping through him at an alarming rate, a tint of grey beginning to creep into the corners of his vision. He wouldn't make it. He was going to throw up.

But he eventually turned onto Chris's road, wheezing, imagining great slinking things chasing him, moving low to the ground ready to snatch him into the brush. He collapsed next to the garden, only half aware of the handful of motorcycles parked in the drive. His ankle was swelling and his lungs felt tight with fatigue and panic. Tripping onto the porch, he pushed through the living room door and was met with what felt like hundreds of eyes, none of them belonging to Chris. There was cigarette smoke and music from a small stereo in the corner, and beer. Lots of beer. But no Chris.

Trembling violently, he murmured, "Daddy."

He was weak and dizzy, and he wanted Chris.

"Hey kid, you okay?" One of the men stood and took a step toward him. Tom lurched back, catching himself on the doorjamb.

"Don't touch me," he gasped.

"Whoa, easy. Who are you looking for?"

"That's Chris's kid," someone said from the sofa, and Tom saw that it was that guy who questioned Tom's age all those weeks ago at the first bonfire. Tom never bothered to learn his name. Was it Johnny?

Swallowing past rising bile, he blinked and the faces shifted about, confusing him.

Maybe Chris was in the bedroom, he thought, already hobbling through the smoke and denim-clad legs.

"Go on, little faggot," Johnny said, and slapped Tom's ass.

Tom squeaked and jumped away, losing his balance and hitting the floor. His ankle on fire, Tom clutched at it, sobbing softly. He couldn't breathe. His chest was so tight. Jeff was coming. Where was Chris?

But before anyone could laugh, the room went deathly silent, the only sound the woeful croons of some country singer on the radio and Tom's broken sobs. Vaguely, he made out the figure of Chris standing at the front door, his eyes on Tom. Very slowly, they slid over to Johnny.

"That was a nasty thing to do, Johnny," one of the other guys said. "You saw the kid's upset about something."

Johnny held up his hands, addressing Chris, who was taking even steps into the room. "Look, man. It was only a joke. I didn't mean for the kid to fall—."

Chris jumped forward and grabbed Johnny by the front of his jacket. He brought his leg up and kneed him in the stomach with a sickening thud. He landed two solid blows to his face, a quick fist and elbow combination, and Johnny went limp. Dragging him to the door, Chris tossed him outside, where he landed on the hard ground with a grunt. He turned and had only to stare into some middle distance before all the others were shooting to their feet and leaving in a hurry. Chris bolted the door and then rushed to where Tom lay shaking on the floor.

"Daddy?" he breathed, blinking to make sure.

"Baby," whispered, cradling Tom's face. His own was pinched with worry and anger. "What happened? Who did this? Jesus Christ, you're freezing." He froze suddenly and then bent down to inhale at Tom's chest, bunching up the fabric of his T-shirt in one big fist. His eyes, when he lifted his head, flashed with fury. "*Jeff*."

"He—he t-ried..." Tom inhaled raggedly, stumbling, trying again. "Daddy, he—he almost—."

But his teeth were chattering too badly, and his vision was clouded with tears.

"Shh. Baby. Okay. Okay, now. I'm here."

With a determined brow, Chris sat on the floor and hauled Tom up on his lap, back against his chest.

"Chris," Tom whispered, throat working. "He—he—he *touched* me."

Whining, his hands scrambled to grab hold of Chris when he felt the sharp bite of teeth on the back of his neck. He winced with a groan, spine going rigid with surprise.

But then something swept through his blood stream and surged into every synapse of his brain. Lashes fluttering, Tom felt every ounce of tension dissipate from his body as he went limp in Chris's arms. Jaw clamped to his nape, Chris moaned and held his teeth there, arms wrapped around Tom, curving his big hands over his shoulders, soothing him. It was a warmth in his blood, different from what he felt every single second of his life. This warmth had a starry tingle to it, a blanketing of constellations over the crown of his head. It started at the top of his spine and spread up into his head, enveloping his brain, relaxing every hair follicle. It swept down the bridge of his nose and to his lips, speckles of dusty light taking residence there. Further down his neck and chest, curling deep in his belly and spiraling low to his hips and kneecaps, the tender curve of calf muscles. Finally it wrapped around the knob of each ankle and settled like glitter in every single toe.

Tom moaned weakly, wilted against Chris, limbs sagging heavily. This was the warmest sun. The softest breeze. This was a galaxy of contentment, spinning him round and round, stardust coating him like grains of sand.

His eyelids were so heavy. He couldn't lift them to see. But he didn't have to. He had only to feel

his alpha, cradling him on the floor, the wet circle of his bite mark cooling immediately after Chris withdrew his teeth and cupped a hand protectively over the back of his neck.

“Easy now, babe. Easy. I’ve got you. Daddy’s here.”

Tom moaned again, face tucked against Chris’s bicep.

Maneuvering carefully, Chris held Tom to his chest as he gathered his legs under him and stood up with a groan, their combined weight making Chris sway a little as he rose. He carried Tom to the bedroom and laid him on the bed, disappearing for a minute. Head lolling, Tom stared hazily at the ceiling, blinking slowly when he caught sight of Chris working above him to strip them of their clothes. Tom no longer shivered, the dopamine in his blood slowing his heart rate and stabilizing his severe shock. He felt so heavy, his legs and arms made of lead, the throb of his ankle injury dulled to a weak buzz. He could but lie there and blink, and even that felt like too much trouble.

There was a goodness seeping into the meat of his flesh, supplanting all previous anxiety and panic and taking root with a devastatingly wonderful ease and belief that he was going to be just fine. Here in the care of his alpha, Tom would be just fine. His small moans barely registered in his own ears as Chris yanked his shorts off, kneeling on the floor and studying his ankle. He muttered something filthily violent and then gathered Tom in his arms, heading for the bathroom.

Chris adjusted the shower head so that it sprayed along the wall, and then he sank down to the bottom of the tub, the porcelain rubbing loudly on their skin. But he ignored it and cuddled Tom against him. Tom’s legs were angled out of the tub, but when his foot slipped in and ducked under the spray of water, he hissed at the sudden sting.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Chris said quickly, rocking Tom with a firm hug. “Let the blood wash away.”

The sudden tension melted off Tom and he lay whimpering, his mouth pressed to the artery in Chris’s neck, the steady pulse of it lulling him.

“Tell me what happened,” Chris said. And in soft, stilted murmurs Tom explained everything. What Jeff had called him, the flying glass of liquor, breaking down his door, escaping through the window, the injury to his ankle, what he feared Jeff might have done to him had he caught Tom this second time.

Warm water misted over them and Tom nestled closer, lips at Chris’s shorn hair, the longer middle strands tangled in his fingers. Chris’s features had hardened and he hugged Tom tighter, smoothing a hand over his naked thigh, the red tint of blood swirling down the drain slowly turning pink and then disappearing altogether.

“I swear I smelled you when you got here,” Chris said softly. “Out back in the garage. Heard your fear, like a drum in my ears. I dropped everything and ran over. And then I smelled the blood. I think my heart stopped.”

“No,” Tom moaned, tightening his arms around him. Fresh tears soaked his lashes.

“Your distress was like an alarm in my head, stings along my spine. I needed to find you.”

“I had to get to you,” Tom whispered. “Going anywhere else didn’t even cross my mind. The hospital. Or the police. It was just you, Daddy.”

“Shh, baby. It’s perfectly okay. I want you to come to me when you need help. I’m happy you did. Because I’m going to take care of this, okay? You’re safe now. You did right by coming to me. You did right.”

They stayed in the tub for more than an hour. Chris washed Tom as best he could with the bar of soap, touching tenderly around the cut on his ankle. He spoke no more words of Jeff, only murmured gently to Tom that he was safe now, wrapping him in a warm towel, drying his hair and kissing his tear-stained face. He bandaged the cut and brought in a small space heater. Tucking Tom under the blankets, Chris stood over him, a blank look on his face.

“Your phone?”

“I had t-to leave it, Daddy.” The effects of Chris’s gentling were wearing off, and his tremors were returning.

“How did you get here?”

“My b-bike.”

Chris’s jaw clenched. “Is he still home?”

Tom tried to control his chattering teeth. “Don’t t-think so. He was drinking, but c-called me back as I rode away. Sc-screamed that he was sorry. I doubt he—he would have stayed.”

Chris said nothing, just bent down and kissed Tom’s forehead.

“I’m going to get your phone back. Okay? Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“Daddy, no!” Tom cried, sitting up. He snatched Chris’s wrist. “Stay with me. Please don’t go.”

Chris hesitated, as if his mind was already set on finding Jeff and kicking his ass. But he nodded after a moment and lay down beside Tom over the blanket. Tom pulled him close, arms wrapped around his back. Chris sniffed along his hairline and started rubbing his cheek over every inch of Tom he could reach. When his mouth slid around the pale column of his neck, he paused at the nape and exhaled against Tom’s skin there. When he bit down he squeezed Tom’s thin shoulders, absorbing his surprised gasp. The gentling worked as fast as the first time, Tom’s body falling limp once more. His breathing deepened and evened out, and his eyes were heavy-lidded when Chris rolled him onto his back. Still, he clung weakly to Chris’s forearms, his fingers circling the thick wrist bones.

“Daddy.”

“Sleep now, baby,” Chris said, palming the crown of his head. Tom’s curls sprung like gold through his fingers. Tom gave in to the drug flooding his system and eventually his shivering died down. He quieted as he fell asleep, but still Chris held him, stroking his hair, hugging his slack body, so thin and delicate, so trusting and lovely. Why he’d chosen a criminal to love and deliver himself to, Chris didn’t know, but he wouldn’t break that trust, he would keep Tom safe above anything else.

Eyes hard on the far wall, images of all the ways he would make Jeff pay flashed in his mind—jaw cracked and hanging crookedly unhinged on his face, kneecaps busted, bone shards pushing through his skin. Chris didn’t like guns, thought they were a coward’s weapon, but he used the occasional knife when necessary. Prison had shown him a thing or two about shanks. Jeff, though, seemed beneath even that.

Tom whimpered and clutched at Chris, brows drawn low in his sleep.

“Shh, baby,” Chris said softly. “You’re safe here.”

When it was obvious Tom wouldn't wake, Chris disentangled himself, hesitating when Tom's hands tightened in his shirt, reflexive and completely unconscious. Setting the blankets up to his chin, Chris closed the bedroom door with a quiet click and went into the living room.

It was a Thursday night and he hadn't been expecting Tom. The guys usually came over during the week to update him on the situation with the liquor stores, with whom the motorcycle club had an agreement. In exchange for protection, the liquor store owners would provide free booze and a monthly fee to dispatched riders, who would collect the goods and bring them back to Mick, who in turn distributed it among the crew. Despite his age, Chris was unofficially Mick's second in command, a position that usually went to an older member. His stint in prison, however, had left Chris somewhat out of the loop, so some of the guys had been coming over to fill him in on how business had gone while he was on the inside. That added with Chris's newfound sense of unease regarding his old bike boss, had him questioning a few things.

But the business was doing well. Two stores were crossed off the list for non-payment, and a few more added in their place. Old-timer Jim Harveux had been acting as second-in-command while Chris was gone, and he gladly relinquished the title to Chris. Jim was a good guy, and the only thing he really cared about was the meaning of the ride, not the power behind it. Chris's return to command had seemed to irk some of the newer guys, like Johnny, but Chris couldn't really give a shit. He had the support of the majority of the crew, including all of the older members, and that's all that mattered to him.

That week, all nine liquor stores would have a biker posted close by, in case of a break in or attempted robbery. Intervening before the police often led to a faster course of action, either capturing the thief or stopping the burglary from even taking place. For insurance reasons, the store owners often didn't even call the authorities, keeping everything under the counter. Sometimes, just the presence of the bikers was enough to keep any crimes from taking place.

Since being released, Mick had given Chris only the bare minimum of jobs, letting him acclimate to being on the outside again. His job at the mechanic shop helped, getting his hands dirty with engine grease, fixing cars and bikes helping to level his head. Besides, he had to keep up a show for his probation officer, that he was keeping a low profile, doing what needed to be done to be a good citizen. He passed all his urine tests and didn't make a fuss during visitations. It had worked out alright.

He'd mentioned nothing of his side jobs to Tom, at least not yet, but it was how he made most of his money. Lots of it. His little place was paid off, as were his bikes. His monthly outlay was pretty small, things like electricity and water and the small taxes for his land. The rest of his funds he had hidden away, keeping an average amount in a bank account that he accessed by debit card only.

The night Chris was arrested, he'd been after Tony, whom Mick had dispatched to handle the late-paying owner of a liquor store downtown. When Chris got wind of it, he'd checked the books and saw that he had the owner as actually current with his payments and booze delivery. He'd called Mick and explained what he knew. Mick seemed quiet about it, eventually admitting that Tony had been handling the books that day and saw the store owner's supposed lapse in payment.

"Go on after him," Mick had told Chris. "Stop him. Bring him in. We don't want Tony breaking the guy's face for nothing."

Not about to let good business go sour because of a miscalculation on Mick's part, Chris had jumped on his bike and accosted Tony just a street away from the store. They'd broken out in a fight, both attempting to carry out his boss's orders. Chris had won. Tony was sent to the emergency room and Chris to jail. The only good Tony managed to do was stay alive, or else time

would have been added to Chris's sentence for manslaughter.

He'd thought of that exchange for years locked in his cell, and now he wondered if there was something more behind the whole reason why Mick had sent both Tony and Chris to the same liquor store, each with entirely different commands. Such doubts had been on his mind tonight, just before Tom arrived bleeding and frozen stiff with pain and shock. Jim had pulled Chris aside in his garage and confided in him that he'd heard whispers of Mick and what he'd done to the store owner's kid.

"Young boy. Maybe fourteen, fifteen. I just think you should know. It was something dark what he did to that boy. Something...sexual. I like you Chris. And so do a lot of the other guys. You're good to us. And younger. If you ask me, I think Mick was covering his tracks. Tony goes after the liquor store owner, you go after Tony. All the loose threads snipped tightly. You get locked up, get out of Mick's hair, and he's done with it."

"What happened to the liquor store owner?" Chris had asked.

Jim shrugged, zipping up his leather jacket. "Killed in a drive by a week later."

"And the kid?"

Jim shook his head. "Don't know."

Chris's stomach fell and it must have shown on his face. Jim took his shoulder.

"I just wanted to warn you. What you hear didn't come from me. But with that boy of yours? You should be careful. I know what you two have is consensual—it's more than obvious with how he is with you, especially with your mated bond—but what Mick did to that store owner's son was not. Only some of the crew know about it, and it's only whispers at that. Keep that kid close."

Jim had left and Chris remained in the garage thinking over what he'd said when he'd caught a whiff of Tom's scent on the breeze, laden with the bitter tang of blood and fear. Running into his house a minute later he caught the tail end of Johnny's slap to Tom's ass, his fall to the floor and Johnny grinning like a damn fool.

And now Jeff.

This sweet innocent pup had no idea the amount of trouble that sniffed at his heels if he wasn't careful. And Tom had been careful, as much as he had known how, but it was Chris's job to keep him safe and whole from now on.

Grabbing his keys, Chris shrugged into his leather jacket and wrapped a black bandana with a skull jaw print around the lower part of his face. Glancing around his living room and kitchen, Chris took in Tom's touch. His house was clean for the first time in years, his mate's presence lightening the atmosphere into something even more pleasant than how he'd known his home previously. It was one of the sweetest feelings he'd ever known.

He walked his bike to the start of his dirt road, not wanting to wake Tom with its roar.

He would check the house first. After that, there were only so many bars the piece of shit could hide in. And he knew he would. A man like that, dependent on booze to get through even a normal day, couldn't stay away from a drink when under pressure.

Tom's house was dark. Chris investigated outside his window, saw the splatter of blood along the metal railing. He slid the pane up, a slow screech sounding in the night. Somewhere down the

street, a dog started barking. In the room, he took a look around at the place Tom slept when he was away from him. Everything looked normal. Unmade bed, textbooks stacked on the nightstand. A rickety desk with chewed pencils stubs and school supplies—a ruler, a calculator, scrawled on index cards, a paperback with a broken spine. He had a small dresser, drawers half empty, with a busted watch and some loose change strewn over the scarred surface. Shoes and socks lying about, Chris picked his way through the room, squinting in the low light. He bent by the bed and pressed his face to Tom's pillow, inhaling that soft scent, his shampoo and sweat, that young boy smell. Feeling under the mattress, where Tom had told him ages ago he liked to hide his phone, Chris pulled out the device. He pressed the home button and the screen glowed brightly, a picture of the two of them, Tom smiling shyly at the camera, cheek pressed to Chris's. There were some game notifications and a calendar reminder for the start of school in a week. He shone the phone light over the rest of the room, but saw nothing else he thought Tom would need. He had plenty of clothes and jackets at Chris's house to dress warmly there. He grabbed the phone charger plugged into the wall and stuffed it with the phone into his pocket and moved on.

The door to the room stood open, the jamb shattered. It looked like Jeff might have cleaned up the evidence a bit, not a shard of wood in sight. Further down the hall, Chris found the main bedroom, but it was empty, as was the living room and kitchen. Doubling back to the master bathroom, Chris lifted the toilet seat and used the tip of his knife to scratch three words into the cheap plastic.

Coming for you.

Unless Tom's mother cleaned the toilet bowl thoroughly—and judging by the state of their bathroom, she probably wouldn't—then Jeff would be the only one who saw the message.

Back in Tom's room, he left the house the way he came in, through Tom's window, closing it behind him. It was late, half past ten, and the bars would be mostly full for a Thursday night. He headed home again, Tom's phone safe in his jacket pocket. Jeff would get the message and then Chris could take his time with punishing him. Making Jeff wait would be half the pleasure.

**

Tom was still asleep when Chris got back.

Curled up on his side, he slept deeply and quietly, face slack and peaceful. Leaving the door ajar, Chris went into the kitchen to cook him some food. He woke him later with butterfly kisses on his temples, whispering for him to come eat. And just because he liked carrying him around like a princess, he hitched Tom up in his arms and placed him at the kitchen table. His ankle was bruised purple, swelling around the cut over the bone. While Tom sipped at his soup, Chris knelt on the floor and propped Tom's leg on his lap, smearing antibiotic ointment on the wound and then wrapping it in fresh gauze.

“When does school start, babe?”

“This Monday.”

“You have everything you need?”

Tom shrugged, clinking his spoon around the empty bowl.

“Babe.”

Sighing, Tom's eyes fell on his cut ankle. “I was going to ask my mom for some money to get binders and paper and stuff. Pens and pencils.”

“I’ll take you for that. Don’t ask her. I’ll buy it for you.”

Tom’s eyes flashed up to his, and there was something tight around their corners that gave Chris pause. “I wish I could go to her for that stuff. I wish…” He broke off and glanced away, picking at a whirled groove in the tabletop.

“You wish that she cared,” Chris said softly, and Tom nodded. His eyes flooded with tears.

“Come here, sweetheart.” Chris gathered Tom in his arms, his smaller frame swallowed up against the bigger bulk of his body, so slender, so slight. The loveliest. The most hurt. Even if Tom now had his alpha and mate as a constant source of stability and physical and emotional affection, there was nothing like realizing one’s mother was indifferent toward her only son.

“I love you,” he said softly. “Can you feel that? How much I love you?”

Tom nodded his head slowly, face pressed moistly into his neck.

“Good. Now, how do you get home from school every day?”

Tom pulled back and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. “I take the bus.”

“School bus?”

“The city bus.”

“And Bobby rides with you?”

“Yes.”

Chris didn’t like that Tom took public transportation. It left him vulnerable to open advances from other alphas. Chris’s scent on him was perpetual and strong, but considering how those two men had approached Tom back at Román’s restaurant, Chris was positive he would be approached again. But the scent and claiming should keep them from doing anything stupid. It should. Yet, what happened with Mick made Chris nervous about leaving Tom alone.

Tom traced a finger around the shell of Chris’s ear. “I’ll be okay, Daddy. I’ve been taking the bus for years. Some days I ride my bike. And I won’t be alone.”

Because Chris’s house was so far into the desert for any bus route stops, it was settled that they would continue their weekend-only visits. Unless another incident with Jeff happened again.

Over the rest of the weekend, Tom continued with his silence, sleeping late, venturing no further than the garden. Chris hovered, bringing him pastry cakes from the Mexican bakery or peach juice from the fund raiser hosted by the nine-year old girls’ softball league. Tom would accept everything, smiling at Chris, kissing his lips, but he wasn’t ready to talk yet, and Chris didn’t pressure him. Tom got in the habit of walking around the house in Chris’s long shirts, which fell to mid-thigh, the color of his panties peeking through the material. Chris would corner him, their make-out sessions urgent and rough, punctuated with moans and lip smacks. Tom, freshly bruised and flushed post-coitus, would lie back on the couch smiling lazily, the late shafts of sunset warming his cheek, a hummingbird flitting at the window.

Here he was loved. And it was helping his heart heal.

“But he won’t try anything, babe,” Chris whispered as he drove Tom home Sunday night. “It’ll be made clearer to him.”

Tom sighed into his helmet and then squeezed Chris tight before climbing off the bike.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Tom said, and smiled. There was just one simple kiss, having done plenty of that just after waking up when Chris mounted and hammered him hard into the mattress, lying so still afterward, the cool breezes of dawn whistling against the window. Their kisses then were slow and soft, and deep.

The cut on his ankle was still tender and bruised black, but a small bandage was all he needed. He tried not to limp as Chris pulled away and disappeared around the corner. Tom stared after him, an ache starting up behind his ribs.

Sore

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

The next Monday morning, parked in a side alley, Chris watched Tom's house. The black skull bandana was back over his face, squinted eyes flitting over the area. It was an older neighborhood, a bit on the rough side, lawns just at the rusted turn of negligence and laziness, unmown and unkempt. Cars decade's old, oil stains on driveways, years of junk gathered in barely concealed heaps in the overgrown backyards. Shingles beginning to sway, paint along the edge of everything beginning to peel.

That his pup had managed to stay so innocent, so kind-hearted and trustworthy, amazed Chris and made him flare with pride. He imagined all the trouble Tom would have had to avoid to stay so sweet.

Tom's mother had left ten minutes ago, her sad little car puttering down the street. The other car, Jeff's, was a slightly newer model and still parked in the drive. Tom had left shortly before his mother, ear buds in place, hitching his backpack up his shoulder and walking down the street. He didn't see Chris, keeping his head down, hands stuffed in both pockets. The closest bus stop was a five minute walk away, but even so Chris had to fight every instinct to keep Tom in his sights. If Jeff had left already, it would have been an easy choice to follow Tom. But the rat was somewhere in the house still, so Chris would wait.

Sitting back on the bike, he crossed his arms. He propped one foot on the frame, eyes sharp on his surroundings. His shades darkened the bright morning light. Early September displayed days that still scorched with the lingering heat of summer, but the nights turned cool and brisk. His mission wasn't stealth, however, so he didn't mind daylight revealing his whereabouts. He wasn't expected at work until ten that morning, so he had a few hours to kill getting Jeff in the right frame of mind.

At the house across the way, a man and a woman barreled out of their front door. The woman was yelling about baby formula, the man knotting up his tie in rough haste. He got into his car and drove away, the woman muttering and stalking back into the house. Ignoring them, Chris turned away. And then movement to his left caught his attention and he flicked his eyes to Tom's house, where Jeff was coming down the front walk, toilet seat in hand.

Chris smirked and stared him down, counting the seconds for the man to look up. When he finally did, Chris kept still, the bottom flap of his bandana moving in the dry wind. Even at a distance, he saw Jeff's face pale, stuttering to a halt, toilet seat clutched under his good arm like a stupid prop in a comedy movie. Bug-eyed, his mouth opened and closed helplessly, until after a long minute he turned and practically tripped in his haste to get back up the drive.

Starting up his engine with a loud roar, Chris guided the bike out to the front of the lawn, smiling at the flicker of movement from one of the curtains. He stared for a long moment and then kicked the bike in gear, roaring around the corner and out of sight.

The next time he saw him, Jeff was at the hardware store, the outline of a new toilet seat visible in a plastic bag. Chris was parked under a bare-limbed Palo Verde, no bandana this time, toothpick

rolling between his lips. Jeff spotted him and retreated into the store again, nervous glances thrown over his shoulder.

Chris let him be after that, knowing Jeff would be a nervous little rat for a few days. Let him struggle with his guilt and his fear and that toilet seat one-armed. He would be forced to face Chris soon.

Pulling out his phone, he tapped out a text to Tom.

Meet me down the street from school. At the gas station.

When classes let out, he was parked adjacent to the pumps as Tom rounded the corner. He grinned at Chris and ran straight to him, limping visibly. He threw his arms around Chris's neck in a hard hug.

"I thought we were going to wait until weekends, Daddy," Tom whispered in his ear. He pulled on his helmet.

"I couldn't wait another minute before seeing you. And I thought I'd spare you the walk to the bus stop in this sun."

Tom laughed sweetly and jumped on behind him, hugging him around the waist. "Very true. All this UV light, what's a girl with porcelain skin to do?"

Chris gunned the engine and flashed a wide smile at him. Hanging on tight, Tom's long fingers curled in his shirt the entire ride home, his thin legs squeezing Chris's hips.

"How was your day?" he asked happily once they were inside his house. Chris marveled at how joyful he was even after the events of the week before. He toed off the grey and black sneakers Chris had bought for him and sprawled on the sofa. Chris sank down beside him.

"Before work, I followed Jeff around a bit."

Tom sat up. "You did?"

"Yeah. Got him good and scared."

Tom crowded closer, scratching lightly at Chris's buzzed hair. "What did you do?"

Chris closed his eyes and sighed, missing him so much. "Nothing. I just let him see me a couple of times."

Tom's eyes fluttered low and he moaned. "You didn't even have to touch him, did you, Daddy? To get him good and scared?"

His voice had lowered, lashes fanning over his cheeks still round with the touch of youth. Chris stared, mesmerized, as Tom's skin flushed, breaths jumping.

"Tom," he groaned, hands circling his small waist, hauling him onto his lap. Tom crashed their lips together, sleek little tongue nudging his own, skimming over Chris's teeth. They grabbed at each other, Chris sliding his hands up Tom's shirt, back so lean and narrow, soft and smooth.

He got to his feet and carried Tom into the bedroom. After kissing the hollow of his chest and tugging the pink panties down, he buried his face between his legs and feasted on his pussy with long, deep licks. Here was that ripe fruit, peach and juniper berries and something thicker, like

swaying wheat in sunlight. Chris moaned and looked up at Tom, who pinched his nipples through his shirt and rolled his hips, those big blue eyes cast down at him, hazy with need. He pulled on his cock and slid a shaky hand down his belly to curl in Chris's hair, urging him closer. Chris obeyed and mouthed harder at his core, flicking his tongue and stabbing in before rolling the plump lips between his own, making them glisten, a deep red.

"How's my girl?" he asked hoarsely, and Tom arched.

"Sore, Daddy."

Chris softened his jaw and lapped at him slowly.

Tom whined and tugged on Chris's hair. "But it feels so good, Daddy. It does."

"What about this?" Chris held up his pointer finger, and once Tom saw it, brought it low to his vaginal entrance, tracing small circles on his wet flesh. Tom immediately perked up with interest, licking his lip with a flash of pink tongue. "Can you take this, baby?"

"Yeah." Tom swallowed, hands in the sheets. "Yeah, Daddy. I think I can."

"Good boy," Chris whispered, letting the tip of his finger dip into Tom's heat. He felt Tom's inner walls give around the intrusion, slick with the juices that Chris could smell on his own face, juniper and peach and dark grains. It was only two minutes later that Tom asked for another and Chris slotted in his longest finger, the middle one, alongside the first.

"Yes, Daddy," Tom grunted, knuckles white in the sheets, his pale chest jumping with small breaths. "I can take you. I can. Gimme your cock. Please. Go slow. But I can take you."

Chris didn't have to be told twice. He was unbuckling his belt before Tom's small voice faded into a breathy sigh, dropping his hips low to guide the head to Tom's cunt. Tom whined for him to hurry, but go slow. Hurry, but slow. Daddy. Please.

Already his cock was engorged, bobbing between them as Chris finally pushed in. They groaned and grabbed each other close, breaths gusting over each other's faces. He wrapped a hand around Tom's cock and fisted it slowly, loosely. That cock that flopped around when he rode Chris, bouncing almost lewdly between his legs when Chris fucked him from behind. That delicious cock, all his.

Slipping inside, Chris stared down at Tom's narrower frame, still wearing only his shirt. The half-nudity made his blood race faster, his senses heightened to every twitch and sound Tom made. Taking hold of the front of Tom's throat, he rode Tom hard, mindful of Tom's injured foot to avoid hurting it.

"Daddy," Tom gasped, stuttering under thrusts. "I love you, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you, too, baby," Chris groaned, steady at that pace, not wanting Tom to come too soon. He was always so ready to burst, any brush of his cock making him keen and writhe, all the simultaneous stimulation too much all at once. Making him take just the full stretch of his cock, Chris avoided squeezing Tom's cockhead, letting his balls slap loudly against the cleft of Tom's ass. Tom always got so pliant and bendy during sex, clinging to Chris with full abandon, his legs bent up to his chest, feet bouncing like pale strips in midair. His toes, Chris noticed, were painted scarlet.

Tom palmed at his face, so in love with smoothing Chris's hair back, loving the different texture of their skins, the rougher and the softer, the tanned and the pale, strong and delicate. Tom absorbed

everything about it, and it made Chris glow with sudden humility that so lovely a creature would find him interesting in the least. He was nothing compared to this desert snowflake.

“Chris,” Tom breathed, long and low, before his eyes were rolling up and his pussy clenched like a vise around Chris’s cock.

“Fuck,” Chris gritted, his jaw clamped as he stuttered to a stop to let Tom suffer so beautifully in his orgasm. Chest flushed with color, neck veins straining, bow mouth parted, lashes fluttering, his hands gripping Chris’s biceps as if he might fly away if he let go. Between them, Tom’s cock remained hard, leaking pre-come. His climax was purely vaginal, and more intense and long-lasting because of it. A tear slipped from Tom’s eye as he cried out softly for the next wave, rocking against Chris, fucking himself on his cock.

Shaking and desperate, Chris pulled out and flipped Tom on his belly, eyes glazed with one flushed cheek pressed to the sheets. Pushing back in, Chris slid his hands under Tom’s shirt and pulled at his waist to prop Tom on both knees, pert bottom poking up in the air. Using both thumbs and index fingers to pinch at his nipples, Chris grinned as he rolled them into tight little nubs. Tom gasped and arched his back.

“Daddy,” he sobbed, letting fat tears roll down the bridge of his nose. How Chris loved those tears, so desperate and brimming with the urgency he felt for Chris, for what only Chris could give him. It made Chris feel invincible, and worth something.

“What do you want, baby?”

“Your cum, Daddy!”

“And what else?”

Tom ducked his head, lashes down coyly. “To please come again, Daddy.”

Chris grinned and lowered his hips, already knowing which spot to hit. He thrust over and over, hard and measured, his big hands ringed around the small of Tom’s back, forcing the arch, hitting him deep. A dozen more times and then Tom was screaming, legs trembling behind them as he pulsed a thick cream. It was only then that Chris let himself go, rooting himself deep and cupping his sac, feeling it draw up as he released inside Tom. There was no knot, Chris’s body still recovering from his first rut since being out of prison. Clinging to the sheets, Tom breathed raggedly, their bodies hot and slick with sweat. His shirt was sticking to him uncomfortably, and he tugged at it, wanting it off.

“Alright, impatient little boy,” Chris laughed, pulling out and helping pull the garment off.

Once naked, they rolled over on the bed, legs twined, playing with each other’s hair.

“I want a shower and then food,” Tom demanded and kissed Chris’s nose. He hurried to his feet just as Chris was nodding off, yanking at his arm. Chris groaned, but let himself be pulled to the bathroom, where they squeezed into the stall despite having no room to maneuver, preferring to be plastered together anyway.

“Your friend didn’t ask where you were going today?”

Tom frowned, hands stilling on Chris’s shoulders, bubbling with soapsuds. Chris ducked his head, meeting his eyes. “Your friend Bobby?”

“Oh,” Tom said, cheeks turning pink. “Well. Daddy. Bobby wasn’t in school today.”

It was Chris's turn to still. "You were going to go home alone?"

Fidgeting from foot to foot, Tom turned into the spray of water, rubbing his face. Chris took his shoulder and turned him back around. "You weren't going to tell me. Why?"

"Because I didn't want you to worry. He told me he wasn't back from his family vacation yet. They went up north, where it's cooler already than here in the valley. He'll be back tomorrow. He'll come with me then." His eyes were downcast, slim fingers circling Chris's biceps, nervous.

"I don't like that, babe."

Tom cast wide eyes up at him, panicked. "Daddy, I didn't want you to—."

But Chris stepped closer, crowding Tom against the shower wall. "I think my boy needs to be punished." He bent and let his full lips nuzzle at Tom's temple, and Tom let out a shaky breath.

"Y-you're not mad at me, Daddy? Disappointed?"

Chris looked at him, eyes crinkling with affection. "No, baby. I'm not mad at you." He took Tom's face in both hands. "I remember when you asked me that before. Back at the prison. You worry about making me angry?"

Tom shrugged, looking down. "I feel like I disappoint a lot of people. And I don't want to disappoint you."

"Baby," Chris sighed, bending low and hauling Tom closer. Tom held tight to his neck, kissing Chris's jaw, his ear, his temple. Chris loved that his toes barely skimmed the floor when he grabbed him up like this.

Reaching down, he shut off the water and stepped out to grab a towel. He took Tom's hands and helped him out, drying them quickly. But even so their bodies were still misted and beaded with leftover water, skin slippery and soft.

Sitting carefully at the edge of the bed, Chris cuddled Tom close in his lap, their kisses turning urgent. Tom's mouth slid from his ear down to the stubbled edge of his jaw and Chris moaned, hand cupping his ass, squeezing. Long hands curved around his neck and scratched into his nape, making chills break out along Chris's spine. Crashing their mouths together, Chris dug his fingers into the thin meat of Tom's waist and pressed their chests together, the great heat of their skin cooled by the fresh shower.

When he broke away, Tom lay curled heavily against him, eyes glazed.

"Why did you lie to Daddy?" Chris asked, rubbing a circle over Tom's ass.

Confused for a moment, Tom blinked. Tears rising, he hiccupped, cuddling closer. "I—I didn't lie. I only kept Bobby's absence a secret because I didn't want you to worry about me getting home on my own. I just want to be a good boy to you, Daddy."

"I know, baby. And you are the best little boy. I can't fucking get enough of you," Chris whispered, pulling Tom closer. "But I think I need to give you a spanking. To teach you a lesson."

Tom froze, recalling Jeff threatening him with the same thing so long ago. But unlike that time, when his heart had been spiked with fear, his pulse jumped now at finally being able to feel what those guys in his online videos felt, and at Chris's hands, it would be just as he imagined it.

"Okay, Daddy," he whispered, cupping Chris's cheek, thumb rasping over his stubble. "I'm sorry."

"Shh," Chris soothed, guiding Tom to stand. Resisting the urge to fidget under Chris's appraising stare, Tom bit his lip and waited.

"Come here," Chris asked gently, patting his lap. Trembling, Tom draped himself back over Chris's knees, his belly and chest supported by the wide breadth of his muscled legs. A warm hand ran over his ass, which jutted up invitingly. Tom grasped Chris's leg, whimpering into the mattress. "It's alright. Just a few. You can take a few for Daddy, right?"

"Yes, I'm a good boy."

"You are a good boy. You're my little boy."

And then he brought his hand down, the smack loud and jarring. Tom gasped, bucking.

"Easy," Chris murmured. Another smack, this time on the other cheek. Tom jumped and clung to Chris, breathing fast.

With one hand holding him by the neck, the other landed on his sore bottom again and again. Legs splayed out, Tom felt on fire, his skin beginning to burn, to buzz. His soft cries turned into a desperate weeping, the slaps to his skin vibrating with pain, but his cock was a swollen rod against Chris's thigh and he writhed to ease some of his need.

Another smack. And another. His skin stinging, burning, Chris's hand soothing it just after, but it wasn't enough.

"Daddy, please!" Tom cried out brokenly, having lost count of the number of spanks, but he trembled with fatigue, tears pouring down his face. His cock throbbed mercilessly, and he didn't know if he loved the pain or hated it.

Chris groaned and rubbed his red skin, Tom wincing from the sensitivity. But against Tom's belly, he felt the hard ridge of Chris's erection and smiled, overjoyed and relieved that Chris was pleased with him. Very suddenly, Chris stood and Tom ended up on his back, lying flat on the bed, Chris covering him completely.

"Thank you, baby. Thank you. You were wonderful. Such an obedient little boy."

Tom sobbed, his tears kissed away by Chris, who cradled his face with soft nuzzles.

When Chris lifted away, Tom stayed put, wiping at his tears, legs clamped shut. But then Chris dipped two fingers into him and swallowed the head of his cock in one motion. Mouth hot, tongue slicking down the shaft, fingers curling to the last knuckle. Tom arched and screamed his name. His hips lifted, seeking more of Chris's mouth, full lips sealed around the width of him. His bottom still stung, but it was a hollow ache, present but not painful.

"Daddy, I'm—."

It was so fast. It was happening too fast. Chris bunched his fingers in and hollowed out his cheeks and Tom's balls drew up as he came, shouting, hoarse and trembling. Chris sucked at the head, tongue flicking at the slit, catching the last spurting drops. Breathing ragged, Tom collapsed back on the bed, head swimming, hands shaking.

Vaguely, he felt a finger inch out of him and begin a sticky trail down to his other hole. He stiffened with surprise. A muted crack of plastic and then a warm river of lube between his legs.

Tom sighed, smiling.

“Tom. Hold still, baby.” A fingertip rimmed his hole, testing the resistance. “Nice and slow, princess. I’m going to go a little deeper.” But Tom was boneless on the bed, breaths harsh, pliant and nodding his head. With one warm hand cupped over his pussy, Chris poured more lube and pressed his finger in, Tom’s hole giving way.

“Chris.”

“I’m here.”

“Don’t stop.” He lifted his head, the apples of his cheeks flushed pink. “Don’t stop. I want you everywhere.”

“Okay,” Chris whispered, nodding. “Okay, Tom.” He began a quick pump into Tom’s ass, his finger sinking in to the last knuckle. He twisted and ran it in small circles, starting the stretch, eyes on him, on his breathing, on the way his delicate hands gripped the sheets, thin wrists flexing.

“You okay?” he whispered, and Tom nodded, licking his lips. “My little boy wants me to fuck him here?”

Tom rose up to his elbows, curls moist with sweat. Legs hanging open like wings, he blinked down at where Chris slid his finger in and out, and then flicked his eyes up at him, something heady and sweetly wicked in them.

“Yes, Daddy. I want you to fuck me there. Will you? Please? As part of...my punishment?”

“Goddamn it,” Chris cursed quietly, bending back over him and trying for a second finger. It was harder to shimmy in, but it finally slipped in next to the first, the muscle giving after a moment. Tom winced but nodded, easing down to his back and watching Chris through his lashes. His cunt was dripping, an impressive river of his own climax. Chris busied his other hand with smoothing the cream over his flushed pussy, smearing it messily.

Wracked with tremors, Tom smiled and undulated his hips. “Tickles.”

But then a third finger pressed over his hole and he gasped.

Chris palmed his belly. “Shh, baby, it’s alright. Hold still for me.” Dropping onto his side, he wrapped Tom close to him with one arm, the other stretched down between his legs still.

“Gonna open up this pretty little hole of yours. So pink and tiny.”

Dizzy, Tom clutched at Chris, one arm on his back, spread over that amazing tattoo, the spinal cord lit from the side as if by candlelight.

Three fingers deep, and Chris could swear he felt every particle of sunlight on his skin, could see every mote of dust floating in the remaining air of that day. Tom trembled through the stretching, Chris kissing his temples, his wet lashes, his lips, shushing him gently, telling him not to cry, that he would take care of him.

And when Chris crawled on top, Tom’s legs fell open even wider, skimming both hands over his waist, the dark tattoos swirling in the stilted light. Lubing his cock well, Chris kept his gaze low as he guided himself in, to where the blunt and wide head of his cock started to breach Tom.

Tom winced, tensing up.

Chris froze. "Relax, baby. Breathe for me." Long strands of hair blocked Chris's face from him and Tom hurried to smooth them back, needing to see his eyes.

"Daddy," he sobbed, crying out again when Chris tried for another inch. "So big. It hurts, Daddy. You're too big."

"You want me to stop?" Voice gruff, Chris held still, body poised above, trembling with tension. "I'll stop if you want me to."

"No! Please, Daddy. Don't stop. It's just..." He took a deep, shaky breath. "It's just—you're so big."

"Give it a minute, baby. You'll adjust to me. You can take it. I know you can."

Another push and Tom grunted, motionless, teeth clenched.

Chris took his face in both hands. "Breathe."

Tom shook his head. Not breathing felt better.

"Tom. I told you to breathe."

Tom exhaled, sobbing out his pain.

"Will you fit? Chris, you won't fit," he whispered, feeling like a metal rod was pushing into him.

"I will. Take it. Take what I give you."

And by patient prodding, Chris finally rooted himself, their pelvises touching, feeling heavy inside him. Tom shook, sniffing quietly, nails dug so deep into Chris's back. Chris waited, breathing harshly, supporting himself on arms hard with strain.

"Don't cry, baby," he whispered. "It'll stop hurting soon. I promise. Let yourself adjust to me."

"Okay, Daddy." Tom breathed in and stuttered his breaths out. But Chris was right. After a few long moments, while Chris looked on with gritted teeth, sweat dripping onto Tom's chest, Tom felt the muscle around his hole give and soften around Chris, still wrapped tight, but less painful.

"I'm gonna move," Chris warned, and Tom nodded. Planting a wide palm on the back of Tom's thighs, Chris bent him double. "I still can't believe how fucking flexible you are. Shit."

Tom blushed and smiled shakily, vision still blurry with tears.

Chris pulled out halfway and pushed in, repeating it again and again. Before Tom knew it, he was drawing back to the tip of his cock and slamming in, body rocking violently beneath him.

"Yes, baby. Such a sweet little ass. Take my cock. It's yours."

Tom reached up with his arms and Chris fell forward, locking their lips, swallowing his tiny yelps. With every thrust, Tom cried out. The pain was still present, but greatly lessened. Instead, there was a jab of pleasure with every thrust, like a spark deep within him and he wiggled his hips, trying to snatch it and keep it going.

Chris grinned, laughing low. "Eager little boy, are you?"

"Uh-huh," Tom moaned. Lashes soaked, they felt cool on his pink cheeks.

“My little boy. You’re mine.”

“Yours, Daddy,” Tom whispered, nodding. He took Chris’s cheeks and pulled him in for more kisses, their lips smacking loudly.

“Such good boy pussy,” Chris groaned, leaning up a bit and watching where he disappeared into Tom. “So good and tight. So fucking tight. I used to imagine this after we met. How tight you would be. I wasn’t wrong. *Fuck*.” He grimaced, hips moving faster. “But this was before I knew about...this little bit of you.” He patted Tom’s pussy and Tom giggled, cupping Chris’s buttocks.

Heavy against his belly, Tom’s cock stirred again, his desire no longer dampened by pain and discomfort. His pussy, empty and still swollen, throbbed as Chris fucked him good and hard, stuffed with thick cock, every vein and that bulbous head dragging over his inner walls, sparking that spark again, blinding Tom with need.

“Daddy, th-that...what is that?”

“What’s what, baby?”

“I can feel it. Inside.” He winced, back arching. “There! Fuck, Daddy.”

“I love when your little mouth gets filthy with words like that. Say it again.”

Tom nodded, curls drenched with sweat. “*Fuck*, Daddy.”

Chris groaned and kept moving, sitting up on his knees, taking Tom’s hips and gripping them hard to bruise. Sprawled out before him, Tom felt weightless as Chris rolled his hips as easily as a doll’s, sinking into him again and again.

Grunting, sweat poured from Chris’s face, shining on his body. Tom trailed his hand down his chest, slick and moist. And then the sparks again and Tom shrieked, head thrown back.

“Found it,” Chris grinned. “That’s your prostate, baby. Hold on.”

Angling himself right, Chris fucked into him, their hips slapping together. Tom rocked, blinded by white dots, spine bowed over the mattress.

“Daddy...can I...?” he mumbled, hand starting to reach for his cock.

“No,” Chris said, and Tom’s hand shot back to the mattress. “You’ll come from this.”

Just a handful of thrusts later and Tom did come, screaming into the small room, hot air swirled only by the lazy ceiling fan above them. A stream of cum poured from his pulsing cock, landing on his own chest and neck.

“Fuck yes,” Chris groaned, watching him fall into the dizzying pool of orgasm. Frantic now, Chris gripped his hips and pounded in hard, Tom’s tears blurring his sight again. Over-sensitized, Chris’s onslaught was bordering on painful, but he didn’t have to wait long.

Chris pulled out in a hurry and stroked himself twice before erupting over Tom’s stomach with a loud groan. Creamy cum gushed out, mixing with Tom’s own seed.

“Mine,” Chris gasped, rubbing his climax out.

Tom, arms flopped to the sides, arched his back, better presenting himself to Chris. And then he lifted his hands and touched the hot strings of cum on his body, pooling together in the concaves of

his chest and belly. Fingertips to the sticky mess, he felt well and truly claimed once more. It never ceased to surprise him, how lovely the feeling was to be claimed.

He cast wide eyes at Chris, who sat heaving, hovering over him.

“More,” he said, smiling wide. “Daddy, I want more.”

Blowing a strand of hair out of his face, Chris grinned, exhausted. “You’ll get more, baby. But Daddy needs to rest for a bit. I’m surprised I have any left in me.”

He flopped down beside Tom, who lay on his back still, happily smearing their joined spend over his torso.

“It looks good on you,” Chris murmured, watching him through half-closed eyes.

“I love that it’s of us both,” Tom whispered. “Because I’m yours.”

“All mine,” Chris agreed, pulling Tom close with an arm around his waist.

Tom traced Chris’s lips, blue eyes so beautifully big. “Do you like the way I smell, Daddy? Do I taste good?”

“Yes, you fucking do. Alphas have a stronger sense of smell. And you, well, it’s like rich, moist earth. Turned heavy with rains. Bits of flowers caught in between. It’s amazing.”

Tom hummed and closed his eyes, pleased.

“How are you feeling? Okay?”

“More than that,” Tom sighed, curling up into his side. “I never imagined how amazing it would be. That the orgasm I get from that is as different as the one I feel in my pussy, or from my cock.”

“I’m pretty jealous,” Chris said.

Tom quieted. “You wouldn’t be, waking up all my life remembering what I have between my legs when during the night I might have forgotten. Remembering that I had to keep it secret.”

Chris’s brow drew low. “I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing to say.”

“I’m not sorry. She was wrong. I know that now.”

Tucking him under his arm, Chris rocked him slowly, kissing his curls and palming the small of his spine. “Sweet princess. I love you.”

Tom lifted his chin, smiling into their quick kisses. “I love you. I don’t want to go back. I have to and I don’t want to.”

“You’ll be mine permanently, soon.”

Tears clouded Tom’s vision. “Not for another two years, Daddy.”

“Don’t worry about that now. Okay? We’ll be fine, me and you.”

Tom fell asleep snug and moist against him. Until about an hour later when he woke rock hard, shifting impatiently next to Chris.

“Daddy,” he whined, arms tight around him.

Chris’s heart flipped, that familiar flame of arousal lighting in his gut. “What, baby? What is it?”

“I need to come again, Daddy. I’m so hard.” Tom rutted against his leg, right against the skull tattoo with the lit cigarette.

Silently, Tom turned away from Chris and lay face down on the bed, peeking at him from over the edge of his arm, a flirty, naughty look from one who was starting to become extremely spoiled. Delighted, giving a short staccato laugh, Chris jumped up and straddled Tom’s thighs, finding his hole still loose enough to take more cock.

He pushed two fingers slicked with lube into him. Tom grunted softly.

“Better, baby?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

This time, when Chris pushed in, Tom moaned into the sheets, toes wiggling. There was only the hot slippery press of Chris’s naked cock, silky smooth and thicker than ever, a different stretch from the one he felt in his pussy.

“You have the prettiest little ass. It bounces so nicely.”

Tom ducked his head, feeling the blush creep up his neck. “Thank you, Daddy.”

Chris gathered him up on all fours and pounded in, wrapping both arms around Tom’s thin torso and delving his tongue into his waiting mouth, slow and easy. Tom’s bottom burned from the spanking, but he moaned at the stretch, the pleasure and the pain mixing so deliciously in his blood.

He arched and Chris held him tighter, widening one hand on Tom’s flat belly to ram in deeper.

"Yes, Daddy," Tom moaned, gripping Chris by the ass. "Fuck me. It's yours, Daddy. All yours."

Chris growled and pushed Tom back on his belly, planting a wide hand on his spine, claiming Tom’s hole with rough thrusts, hips snapping fast. It was a harder and quicker fuck than before, rocking into Tom with loud groans. His slim legs pressed together, Tom’s bottom poked high and gorgeously round for Chris to take. They rocked together, the mattress creaking with their motion. Tom, adrift in the great power that was Chris above him, lost track of how long they lay there, rutting and gasping. But his skin was buzzing and he whined and clawed at the sheets, ready to burst.

“You don’t disappoint me, Tom,” Chris said softly, hips snapping hard. “Okay? You don’t disappoint me and you’re the sweetest part of me. The only sweet part I have. Don’t be afraid of me.”

He pulled out and flipped Tom onto his back, his skinny arms already lifting to hug Chris to him. Such heavy, delicious weight, hot and hard. He wanted to die under this weight. Tears blurring his eyes, he sobbed quietly, hands hooked under Chris’s shoulders.

He shook his head. “I’m not afraid of you, Daddy. I’m not. I love you.”

Chris kissed the tears, smiling. “My baby. I love you, too. Come, Tom. Come now.”

Tom fisted his cock, sliding his fingers down over his cunt and back up again to swirl up and down his erection, and back again. He was so close, pitching his hips forward and back until he too climaxed with a strangled scream, breath tight in his chest, eyes rolling up, a hand clawed in the pillows. He spilled on himself, a long stream landing across his mouth, and Chris bent to kiss him, lapping up the cum from Tom's lips, the taste bitter and salty.

Tom was so in love.

"I'm coming, baby. Gonna fill you up."

Tom nodded fast and tilted his hips. Chris groaned his release, thrusting a little deeper, spilling thick spurts of his seed into his mate. Tom felt the hot gush of his cum, swearing he could feel his very cock swell with each pulse inside. His heart raced, Chris gripping his hips and slamming in again with a groan. He clenched his hands over the back of Chris's thighs, lifting his head.

"Not yet, Daddy," he pleaded. "Don't pull out. Stay inside me. Just a while longer."

Chris trembled above him, panting, long strands of hair falling free.

"Okay," he rasped, grimacing as he relaxed his weight on Tom's body, so slender and lovely beneath his.

He went soft, but their hips were flush, so he stayed snug inside. Happy there was no more left to spill, they dozed for a short while until Chris slipped out when they shifted on the bed.

"I'm seeing the nurse tomorrow," Tom whispered.

"What will you say?"

"That I've had my first heat and that I spent it in my room."

"And if they ask about a mate?"

"I have none."

"Will you text me when you're done with your appointment?"

Tom smiled and nuzzled his cheek. "Of course, my Chris."

Blood to the Surface

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

“Tom? You have a slip for the nurse’s office.”

Mrs. Liz held out a slip of paper for him, and Tom stood from his desk. Zipping his backpack closed, he walked up the aisle between the desks. There were snickers from his classmates, the usual banter at someone called out of class, but he ignored them, returning Mrs. Liz’s smile. He took the note and headed to the door.

As promised, Tom had compiled all of his letters with Chris—except for those that became noticeably more personal and flirtatious toward the end of summer, those he saved for himself—into a nice portfolio, including a short paper he’d written with mostly bullshit observations about the prison system, juxtaposing freedom and incarceration, blah blah. Mrs. Liz’s eyes lit up when he presented the binder to her, calling his project creative and insightful. He’d smiled and thanked her, but kept his true excitement quiet. Neither she nor anybody knew of the flutter of emotions that had taken residence in his chest, like tiny tickling wings, since sending that first letter three months before. Not even his friend Bobby had any idea how Tom spent all his spare time, but they’d exchanged numbers and kept in contact that way. Tom could only hope that his excuses about spending more time with his cousins kept up his hidden life with Chris.

The hallways always loomed creepily between classes, emptied of students and resounding with echoes of even the smallest noises, footsteps and car horns and textbooks settling inside scuffed lockers. Ms. Emherst’s office was in the same area as the principal’s office. Tom kept his head down as he passed through the administrative area. Even though there was no one around to sniff out Chris’s claim of him, it still made Tom nervous knowing he held so dangerous a secret.

He knocked and was beckoned in by a soft voice.

“Ms. Emherst?”

“Tom, come in!”

Ms. Emherst was a tall woman with red hair she liked to keep plaited down her back. She wore jeans and a green sweater, with pearl stud earrings that complimented her dimples nicely.

“Thank you for seeing me.”

“Thank you for setting an appointment. That almost never happens.” She laughed and sat on her rolling chair, patting the low bed that looked more like a cot than anything. Tom set his backpack down and took a seat at the edge, running his palms nervously over his knees.

“So. How can I help you today?”

“I wanted to register as an omega.” The words were warm feathers on his tongue that flowed out into the air and lay hovering between them. Tom would have preferred keeping his identity as an omega to himself, but it was the only way he would be excused from school when his heats struck.

If he were absent so many days out of the year without reason, his teachers would become suspicious or think him undedicated. Chris already had an understanding with his boss; he would be allowed time off for his own ruts and his mate's heats, as long as Chris provided him a few cases of beer every month.

Ms. Emherst looked startled for a moment.

"Tom, you're almost seventeen."

In the way of his generation, Tom simply shrugged. *I don't know.*

She pulled out a folder from a drawer in her desk. "When did you have your first heat?"

"Mid-July. I think." He feigned confusion, knowing very well the exact date. "It was all a...gross blur." He shrugged again.

She nodded in understanding. "Heats and ruts, especially the first few, can be upsetting. You don't know what's going on. Your body's doing all these things."

Don't say 'urge', Tom prayed, already distinctly uncomfortable. But it seemed she'd navigated these choppy waters before.

"But you get better at them. You get better at identifying when you'll get your heat, and what you'll need to get through it alone. Which brings me to my next question: you weren't mated during this first heat?"

Tom blushed and did his best to avoid ducking his head. He shook it, eyes wide. "No way."

"That could complicate things, as you're underage. Which is why I'm happy you told me about your new development. We can send you home on the days you get your heat and then you come right back to school when you're done. If you'd gone into heat here on campus, the alphas in the upper west floor of the school would have been able to tell."

Tom gulped. He'd forgotten about those alphas, the borderline violent, often uncontrollable bucks who were just blooming into their natures. But they would never be able to distinguish Tom from the rest of the omegas at school. He never crossed paths with them, and there would never be any reason for him to speak to one. They were taught separately for a reason.

"Is that it, then?" he asked, hoping to leave now.

"First heat was mid-July," she said to herself, writing notes into his file. "And you didn't get another in August before school?"

"No."

"That's okay. Your body is learning to synchronize itself. Often cycles are meant to join a mate's, but since you have none, your cycles might be erratic at first." She skimmed his paperwork. Tom's chest started aching in that familiar way, missing Chris, hating the time apart from him. "When was your last doctor's visit?"

Tom wondered that too. His mother wasn't exactly on top of things like that. "Like last year sometime."

"You're up for another annual exam."

“Okay.”

“So, I’m assuming your next heat should be soon. As soon as you start to feel any of the signs that you’ll get it, disorientation, flushed skin, bellyaches, come see me and I’ll provide you a pass to stay home. Your teachers will be informed so that they can prepare makeup work for you and class notes from the days you missed. Any questions?”

“You’ll keep track of my heats, too?”

“I will.”

“Does my mom have to know?”

“You’re under eighteen. She has the right to know your medical status. But,” she said, rolling closer and tucking his file against her stomach. “I won’t disclose anything to her if you don’t want me to. Not unless it is a major emergency and we have no choice.”

Tom nodded, relieved. “Yes. I prefer that, please. I’m sort of...embarrassed by all this.”

“There’s no need to be. Every type, whether it be alpha, omega, or betas, have advantages and disadvantages over each other. But you need to remember that it’s all natural. We all go through something. Even betas go through puberty and that’s just as awful.”

She grinned, and Tom returned it. He left her office feeling better about her knowing, and confident about missing school when he got his next heat.

Which would be soon. He could already feel it.

**

“Can you feel it?” Chris asked that weekend. It was a Saturday afternoon and Tom was lying out on a lawn chair he’d found stacked in the corner of Chris’s garage. Wearing jeans and a black bra, Tom lay back against the slanted plastic strips, pink heart-shaped glasses perched high on his elegant nose. He smiled up at Chris, who cast him in shadow, the aging sun outlining him in fire.

He traced a hand down Chris’s thigh. “Feel what, Daddy?”

“Your heat. It’s coming, right?”

“Yes. I can feel it.”

Chris palmed Tom’s belly, dragging his lips down to his flat abdomen.

“I can feel it too. A tightening in my gut. All I can think is, my mate, my mate, my mate.”

“I won’t be as frightened this time. I’ll know what to expect.” He brushed Chris’s hair back. “What are we doing tonight? Dinner? Movie? Sex?” He giggled and let Chris crawl next to him on the chair, rubbing their noses together.

“I think tonight’s the night.”

Tom grew serious, his blond brow bunching.

“Do you want to be there?” Chris said.

Silence. Long fingers in his hair, a puff of sweet breath on his face. And then, “Yes, Daddy.”

“I’m gonna hurt him bad, baby.”

“I know, Daddy.”

He kissed his nose. “Go get ready.”

**

It was late and there was a house party down the street in Tom’s neighborhood, thick bass beats pulsing low on the ground. While Chris took a look around the rest of the interior, Tom headed to his own bedroom, feeling a stranger in it. Practically living with Chris, Tom kept most of his clothes and things at his house, having sorted them in time beside Chris’s clothes in his closet, their toiletries lined together on the bathroom sink. Slowly, his books and music and binders and gadgets made their home in Chris’s bedroom, and neither of them made mention of it, both happy for the change, continuing to fuck and eat and sleep together, laughing and petting each other, Tom never having felt more loved in his life.

It was only for appearances’ sake that Tom stayed at his mom’s house most nights, his age restricting him to remain under her care. But ‘care’ was a loose term when it came to his mother. It had become increasingly apparent to Tom that he had existed up until this point alone. That she, after a certain age, gave up on him. And it made him equally despaired, and furious.

Quietly, he took a spare bag from his closet and started filling it with some of the last few things he wanted to take with him to Chris’s house. Glancing around, his room looked bare and void of a personal touch. Bed made, desk clear of clutter, closet nearly empty.

This wasn’t his home anymore. It hadn’t been for a while.

He bumped into Chris in the hallway, staring at the dent in the wall made by Jeff’s flying glass of scotch. Tom took his hand and they went into the master bedroom.

Chris sat Tom down on the floor of his mom’s room, far enough from the door to be safe and out of the way. They kept the lights off. Chris took a wide stance a foot from the door and crossed his arms. For over an hour they waited, the music from the house party the only sound. Tom knew better than to say anything. Chris was crackling with pent up tension, jaw tight, standing as still as a statue. He went through his things quietly, organizing them in his bag, darting his eyes up at his mate every few moments, reading the line of his shoulders, the ripple of muscle as he breathed.

They’d left Chris’s bike in the alley behind his house. His mother wouldn’t be home until after two in the morning, so Chris would be uninterrupted in what he planned to do.

With music echoing faintly, they heard the front door open down the hall. Tom sat up. Chris didn’t move an inch.

Trudging footsteps in the hall and then the bedroom door pushed open. Jeff flicked on the lights, a swell of brightness that illuminated his shocked face.

Chris smirked. “Hi.”

Jeff swallowed loudly, foot sliding back. “Look—.”

“Don’t move,” Chris said. “And don’t run. I’ve got a couple of buddies out on the curb. You won’t get far.”

Tom glanced at him. This was news, unless Chris was bluffing. Tom assumed he was.

Sweat shone on Jeff's face and he blinked rapidly, as if that might make Chris disappear. As far as Tom could tell, he wasn't drunk, only clutched his briefcase in one hand, his other slipping into his jacket pocket.

"Why don't you just go," he said quietly. "He's never here anyway. Take him and get out!"

"I told you what I'd do if you touched him again," Chris said, eyes drifting down to where Jeff's hand was hidden in his pocket.

"I was drunk, alright! You'll blame a man for having a drink?"

"Not at all. I need one myself every now and then. Especially after Tom's fucked himself on my cock for the better part of the morning." He smiled when Jeff flushed red, angry eyes flitting to Tom, who sat quietly by the window. "But I will blame a man when he beats and tries to force himself on an innocent kid. Especially when I've made it clear that the kid is mine." Chris narrowed his eyes and took a small step forward. "Imagine my surprise when Tom arrived at my house, limping and bleeding, his ankle sliced. And your scent all over him."

Jeff's face turned an ugly mottled red and he yanked his hand out of his pocket. The gun was small, but had a shiny glint to it, and it made Tom's heart stop in his chest. Pointing it straight at Chris, Jeff's arm shook slightly, but he sneered in all his assumed triumph.

Chris's face remained cold, blinking low at the gun, and then back at Jeff.

"You dumb fuck," he muttered, and then crossed the space in two large steps.

Panicked, Jeff pulled the trigger and Tom flinched, covering his face. But he only heard the empty click of a stoppered bullet and he peeked through his fingers. Chris barreled into the man, crushing him against the wall. He knocked the gun loose and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket.

"You *would* pull a gun on me, you fucking coward," Chris growled, towering over Jeff. "The thing with men like you is that you think holding a weapon means you know how to use it. A safety is useful for proving what idiots you all are."

He slammed him back against the wall, Jeff's head thudding hard.

"What did I say I would do to you?" Chris hissed. "If you touched him again? What did I say?"

Pulling at his wrists, toes skimming the carpet, Jeff struggled.

"Answer me!"

"You would break more shit," Jeff sneered, saliva misting between his teeth. Tom's stomach turned. "But I don't know why you bother with him anyway. He's not important. His mother doesn't even ask for him. Why do you think that is, huh? Who wants some fucking fairy for a son?" He started laughing low in his chest, a dark and unkind chuckle that screwed itself deep into Tom's brain, into his cruelest thoughts, the ones of his mother and her opinion of him.

Tom, hugging his legs to his chest, felt something crack behind his ribcage and tears sprung to his eyes. The hurt was worse than he thought it would be.

"Gone all the time," Jeff continued, leering at him over Chris's shoulder. "He isn't even *missed*. No one wants you. Not even your own mother."

Chris flicked his eyes between Jeff's grey ones, watery and red with pressure-burst blood vessels.

Behind him he could hear Tom crying softly.

"Go outside, baby," he said abruptly.

"But, Daddy—." Tear-filled and saddened. It cut right through Chris's heart. He gritted his teeth.

"Wait by the bike, Tom." He didn't mean for his voice to be so sharp, but he didn't want Tom to hear any more of the filth Jeff was spewing.

There was rustling and then Tom appeared at his side, bag strapped over his shoulder. Chris chanced him a look. Eyes brimming, nose and cheeks red from crying, Tom stared at Jeff, face slack in his revulsion. And then he slid his gaze to Chris. He leaned his forehead on Chris's shoulder, nudging it with affection, before walking around him and out the door. Chris heard him leave through his window.

"Daddy," Jeff scoffed, brows bent angrily. "Unbelie—."

Chris cracked his elbow hard against one temple. Jeff cried out and slumped. Pulling him upright, Chris looked him dead in the eye. "You don't deserve that kid. You or his mother."

"I wasn't lying about that. She doesn't ask for him. Hardly raises an eyebrow at how often he's gone from the house. The kid could be lying dead in the gutter and she wouldn't know. Wouldn't think to ask until it was too late and he was rotting into the ground."

Chris growled and brought his knee up, landing a blow right in his sternum. Jeff grunted and bent double, wheezing as he pitched forward when Chris flung him to the floor, collapsing onto his stomach. Before he could roll over, Chris angled his foot and brought down the heel of his boot directly on the hard bone of Jeff's right ankle. He felt it fracture under his heel, crunching obscenely, and Jeff screamed in agony.

Down the street, the house party was in full swing. One lone scream lost among many would be heard by no one.

Sobbing brokenly, Jeff sagged on the floor, legs splayed wide. Any other time, Chris would have done more, hit him harder, made him really feel it, but he didn't want to have touch the piece of shit longer than necessary, and he needed to make sure Tom was okay.

These cookie cutter houses, now on the tail end of decline, all had imitation porcelain bathtubs, enamel layered over cold cast iron. Chris grabbed Jeff by the back of his shirt and dragged him to the small bathroom in the corner.

"Open your mouth," he growled, using a handful of Jeff's hair to prop his chin against the rim of the tub. Jeff shook his head, mumbling and trying to crawl away. "Open it!"

"No, please. I'll leave him alone. I will!"

"That's what you said before. Only now, I'll make sure you won't be able to say anything for a really long time. I hope you have a great time eating your food through a straw."

They struggled, Jeff attempting to push Chris off, Chris finally twisting both arms behind his back, mouth pressed to the tub.

"Open, or I'll break your teeth, too."

Tears pouring from his eyes, snot running from his nose, Jeff pleaded. But Chris shook him again

roughly and his lips slowly parted, mouth opening to bite at the rim of the tub.

Chris lifted his elbow and, aiming for the back of Jeff's head, brought it down hard.

**

He found Tom on the ground by his bike, hugging his knees and crying into his folded arms.

"Baby," he whispered and scooped him up. Setting him on his feet, he hugged Tom tightly, soothing his rounded shoulders jumping with his tears.

He kissed his forehead. "Baby, we have to go. Come on."

He got on the bike and Tom followed, his bag strapped to his back. He refused the proffered helmet and buried his head against Chris's shoulder blades. Putting it on himself, Chris started the bike and peeled out of the alleyway, heading toward the edge of town. Against his back, he felt the moist spread of Tom's tears on his flannel shirt, and he gunned the bike, maneuvering around the handful of cars sharing the road.

He finally braked and slowed around the bend into his property, parking the bike in the garage. They dismounted and Tom tailed him as he closed the big doors and chained them tight. Into the house they went, hands linked. Tom retreated into the bathroom and was in there by himself for a few minutes before he emerged, tears wetting his cheeks. He took Chris's hand and went back in.

They showered slowly, Tom continuing to cry against his chest. Chris lathered him with soap, rinsing his hair gently, and finally toweling him dry. He was still weeping quietly as they lay in bed after, his eyes swelling, skin burning with the rush of blood to the surface.

Chris held him, stroking his curls, lips at his fevered brow.

"Please don't cry, baby," he murmured, feeling helpless. "It's not worth it."

Tom hiccupped, trembling against him. "Why—why doesn't she *want* me?" he wept, great wracking sobs that shook his thin frame. "What did I ever do to her? Besides being born with a penis. And a vagina? How is that my fault, Chris? How? I've been good. I'm a good son. I'm no trouble to her. I'm *good*!"

Chris drew back and looked him in the eye. "Listen to me, Tom. You can't listen to a word that man says. He'll gut you where he knows it hurts the most. And your mom doesn't know what she's giving up in you. You're the sweetest boy I've ever met. The sweetest boy. From what you've told me, she's a tired bigoted woman who works a lot. Comes home, sleeps, goes back to work. She doesn't worry about you because you're smart. You look after yourself. And she doesn't know Jeff like we do. But that's not our problem. She'll wise up soon enough. You have to let her make that decision. And you're not hers anymore. Your Duality makes you the rarest person, stunning in my eyes. You're so beautiful, holding inside you everything that makes a boy and a girl the loveliest. My flower. My angel. Haven't I told you of my heart? And what it feels for you? You fill it to the brim, sweet princess.

"And, Tom, I know you know this. But I want to say it again. I'll take care of you. I love you. And I'm grateful every day that you chose to write to me and not some other fucktard at the prison." He brushed a tear away with his thumb, big and fat and gleaming in the low lamp light. "Please don't cry. You deserve more than this. You deserve love and happiness. Let me give that to you. I'm your mate. Your protector. I'll be the one from now on who will make sure you're safe and healthy and fed. Because you're my mate. And that's a bond deeper than that between parents and their

kids. Especially a mother who doesn't deserve her son."

Tom clutched at him and wept, his body warm from the exertion of fighting the demons that plagued him. Eventually, he fell into a fitful doze, mumbling incoherently, eyes rolling beneath their lids. The emotions of the night had exhausted him, and he clutched at Chris weakly, startling awake if Chris so much as shifted an inch, eyes wide on the room around them, as if his dreams were truly terrible things. Chris hushed him gently each time, tucking him under his arm again until Tom slumped against him, asleep. His sweet little mouth pressed against his skull tattoo, Chris watched him, wondering where Tom would be now if they had never met, what might he have had to endure if Jeff was still after him.

He gritted his teeth at the thought, tightening his hold on Tom, who squirmed slightly, moist warm skin sticking pleasantly to his. Trying to stave off images of Tom bloodied and unconscious, silenced and violated, Chris thought instead of the solace they'd found in each other. No doubt Chris would have eagerly fought yet another person in prison, consequently extending his time; or even jumped right back into the dirty part of the business with the crew before he was ready, broken probation, quit his job. Mated with the wrong person. It was endless all the ways he could have gone horribly astray. Having found a new focus in Tom, Chris could easily see the coming years, when before they might have been blurred by the possibility of death or further imprisonment.

He rubbed his eyes and reached behind him to turn off the light. Nose in his curls, he relaxed against Tom and slept.

The next morning was Sunday. He felt Tom rise just after dawn and slip into the bathroom. The tap opened and closed, the bundled little noises one makes when brushing their teeth and washing their face. When he finally emerged, his face was dry and his curls were wet, bouncy still, but refreshed for the day. He sat at the foot of the bed and busied himself soaking a cotton ball with acetone and removing his nail polish. Chris watched this all in silence, not wanting to interrupt Tom in what seemed a very personal mission. Once his fingernails and toes were all clear, he reached into his backpack and chose another bottle, this one containing bright pink lacquer. He started with his toes, bending one leg and propping his foot at the edge of the bed, tongue poking out as he painted all ten. Chris shifted onto his side and Tom whispered, rather seriously, "Don't move, Daddy."

His hands were next, swiping the soaked brush over each nail until they were all evenly bright. He lay back down next to Chris, blowing on them softly, his feet flexing front and back.

"I want to go to the movies today, Daddy. I want to see something with explosions. And guns. I want something violent. With fire, too. Is there anything like that?"

"I'm sure there is, babe. I'll take you to whatever you want to go see."

"Mm. Good. Thank you." His face was stoically calm, a quiet reserve about him that made Chris sad to see. He was being brave now, while the sun gave him courage. They had an early breakfast and then Tom trailed after Chris into the backyard, flopping down onto the lawn chair with his heart-shaped sunglasses and a magazine. Chris kept an eye on him as he got to work in his garage. He kept all of the important crew business paperwork in a vault behind a set of tires in the back corner. Jake Harper had sent him an accounting of that week's alcohol transactions, and any run-ins with thieves where their bikers were directly involved. So far it had been a good couple of months since Chris had been out of prison. He hoped to continue this good streak.

The sun was starting to shine brighter in the sky, and he glanced over at Tom, at all that bare skin.

"You'll burn out here, princess."

“Are you done out here, Daddy?”

“Yes. How’s your tummy?”

Tom rubbed his stomach, eyes obscured behind two pink hearts. “Any day now.”

“Do you have the number for the nurse at school?”

“Yes. In my phone.”

“Good. If it hits tomorrow morning, you’re staying with me.”

Tom smiled. “As if I could manage any other way.”

Inside, Tom changed into some tight jeans and his grey boots, throwing on a soft purple T-shirt with a single sunflower stamped to the front. He fanned his eyelashes with a fresh coat of mascara and rolled on some perfume behind both ears and in the hollow of his throat. Admiring his nails by the front door, he looked lovely and bright, his eyes only slightly swollen from crying the night before. Chris kissed his cheek, lips plump with gloss.

They went in the Camaro, thinking to stop for groceries on the way home. But first they stopped by an ice cream parlor downtown.

Tom knew he was worried about him. Those squinted eyes focused on him as they shared a sundae, at Tom’s wordlessness. Chris didn’t push him. He simply took his hand under the table and shared in his silence. Tom did his best not to think about what Jeff had said, knowing that Chris was right. He couldn’t hurt Tom physically anymore, so he would hurt him emotionally, attacking the only part of him that Tom felt should have been his by right, his own mother. But Tom had the glaring suspicion that she wasn’t really entirely his anymore, and hadn’t been for a long time. Growing up without his biological father had meant he got to keep his mother to himself. She never really dated, not after having Tom and finding out his half-natures. Jeff was the first one she allowed to woo her, buy her things, help her around the house. When he moved in, it was just as surprising to Tom as it seemed to be for her, who shrugged and went about her business, only now with a set of helping hands. It wasn’t that Tom didn’t help. He did. He washed dishes and he swept and he dusted and he tried to cook, but wasn’t very good at it. But he also had school and that took up so much of his time. Jeff seemed able to help with so much more, handy with stuff around the house, handy with money for the bills. Tom felt more and more brushed aside until he stopped contributing altogether, seeking constant sanctuary in his room, in his books and his bike, which would take him wherever he needed to go. His bike was now a permanent sight on Chris’s porch, as were all his clothes and belongings in the rest of the small adobe house. Tom had even stored the original letters he and Chris had exchanged when he was still in prison in the purple bag his panties had come in, putting them away at the top of Chris’s closet. Was it worth brooding over? Maybe not. But it still hurt.

At the cinema, Tom left his shades on as Chris bought the tickets, sucking on a Blow Pop he’d pulled from out of nowhere. He took Chris’s hand and led him inside, quietly asking for a chocolate bar and a large soda. They chose seats at the very top, Tom curling around Chris’s arm and sucking at the chocolate. Sunglasses pushed up into his curls, he watched the movie with rapt attention, eyes wide on the screen. His fingers slipped into Chris’s palm, squeezing when he jumped at a loud explosion or giggled at a joke.

Chris hardly watched, absorbing every twitch and vibrating giggle Tom gave. Tom was adamantly refusing to talk about what Jeff had said the night before, and even though Chris knew that pushing dark things like that deep down into oneself wasn’t healthy, he also knew Tom would open up

about it when he was ready. Plus, he would get his heat any day now, possibly tomorrow. Even now, he radiated warmth, his smooth brow dotted beginning to dot with fresh sweat.

When the movie ended, they stayed in their seats while the theatre emptied out. Tom rested back with his eyes on the ceiling, swallowing thickly. His neck shone in the auditorium lights. Chris glanced around but saw they were alone, aware of the pheromones Tom must be emitting.

“Baby. You’re not feeling well. Is it your heat?” He cupped his cheek and Tom flicked his eyes over to him, beginning to glaze over. Cheeks flushed, curls dampening, Tom looked about ready to slip away from him. His voice was deep, hoarse with a rush of hormones.

“Chris.”

Chris stood fast. “Let’s go.”

He pulled Tom through the crowds out in the lobby, noticing the long looks some men gave Tom. Chris felt his hackles rising, throwing an arm around Tom’s shoulders and pulling down his pink sunglasses to cover his eyes.

“It’s...happening so...fast,” Tom mumbled, dragged along beside Chris.

“It won’t hit ‘til the morning,” Chris said, unlocking the passenger door and helping Tom inside. He ran around and climbed in. The engine roared to life. “But you’ll start to feel the ache now. The fever. And people will smell it.”

Tom moaned and curled around his stomach. Chris’s nostrils flared, sensing him already. He whipped his head around before backing out with a loud peel of tires, more than one man starting to walk in their direction, noses in the air, sniffing.

“Not a fucking chance,” Chris muttered, throwing the car in gear and racing out of the lot. The groceries would have to wait. He needed to get Tom home and iced down, knowing the heat building up inside could be eased in some ways besides penetration.

Mouth grimaced, Tom fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his phone, dialing with a shaky thumb, his other hand clawed around Chris’s bicep.

“Ms. Emherst,” Tom gasped into the receiver. “It’s Tom. Hiddleston. I know it’s Sunday but I’m calling because I feel my heat coming on. It’s just started, I think. I won’t be in tomorrow or Tuesday, probably. I’ll call again once it’s passed. Thank you.”

His phone slipped from his hand and landed on his lap, head lolling on the seat.

“We’re almost there, Tom. Hang on a bit.”

He turned into his drive, dirt spitting out behind his back wheels, a plume of dust billowing like a skirt over the house. Tom climbed out and made his way slowly to the house, feet dragging until Chris caught up and scooped him up into his arms.

“Cold shower. Please.”

“Anything, Tom.”

Chris stripped him of his clothes, laying his boots and pink sunglasses on the floor. The water was icy cold and Tom moaned in relief, dipping his face in and leaning back to let the spray land solidly on his stomach. After, Chris laid him in bed and went to get a bowl of ice, giving one to

Tom to chew on and running the other cubes over his neck and chest, down to his pelvis and between his legs. The cubes melted like butter on a skillet.

Tom's cunt was already beginning to drip, his body to ease into what it needed most. But for now, he needed to sleep. The fatigue and the borderline pain would carry him into the first throes of his heat, in the morning.

"I'm here, babe," Chris whispered, brushing Tom's hair back from his feverish forehead. "Rest. I'm not going anywhere."

While Tom slept, mumbling quietly, Chris texted his boss about missing work. He studied Tom's prone form on the bed, wondering about their cycles. After his heat, Tom would get his period. And then in a few more weeks, Chris would get his rut. They were greatly off kilter for now, but Chris was already beginning to wonder what they would do when their calendar markings showed their cycles getting closer and closer. Crossing his arms, he stared down at the floor, an idea in mind.

A painful one.

But he would need help. And he would need Tom to agree.

**

Tom woke him the next day with his urgent, sweet moans, moist hands fumbling over Chris's back, clawing a red map to follow him home by. Chris had everything ready this time. He'd carried the mini fridge he had in the garage and plugged it in his bedroom. Stocking it with water bottles and sliced fruit, Tom's favorite thing to eat when they fucked. Chris also had on hand towels and ice packs. The first day passed quickly, Tom's tight little pussy loosening with every knot. They were drenched in fluids by the second day, thighs flaked with cum, bruises darkening, lips swelling, their whispers like flowers on their skin. They drank water and giggled and fed each other cantaloupe and grapes, watermelon and pineapple, mouths sticky with sugar and seed.

Tom's wanton words drove Chris to insanity, whispering hotly for Chris to fuck him deep, to make him pregnant. It was the heat, Chris knew, that inherent biological trigger inside of Tom that made him say such things. But it still made Chris harder than ever, ramming into him, Tom's small cries and the wide way he split his pussy open making him come again and again, following Tom down into the spiral of orgasm.

Wednesday dawned over their sticky and sore limbs. Tom was once more of normal temperature, breaths calm and relaxed in sleep. Chris pulled himself out from under him, and stumbled into the bathroom to piss. Tom's phone was beeping with a new voicemail.

"Babe," he said, back in the room. It was littered with empty water bottles and fruit husks. "You have a message."

"Speakerphone," Tom moaned from under the pillow.

Chris laughed and played the message. It was from the school nurse.

"Tom, hi. It's Ms. Emherst. Thank you for your message. I hope you're doing alright. You've been excused from school through Wednesday. Your teachers will have makeup work ready for you. Any problems with unwanted attention? Often these kinds of situations where an unbonded slash unmated omega is going through their first heats, nearby alphas will try to mate with them. If anything like this happens, you can report it to me and I will take action by filing a complaint

against molestation or sexual advances. We're here to help you, Tom. Whatever you need. Give me an update and we'll get you back situated at school. Take care."

Chris shut the phone off and placed it on the bedside drawer.

"Do you trust her?"

Tom sighed and poked his face out from under the pillow. He had a bruise on his jaw from where Chris had sucked at him.

"I don't know," he rasped. "She seems nice. Like she understands. But our age difference and your criminal history...she might look down upon that."

Chris nodded.

"The thing is," Tom continued. "I'm good to go when I have my heats. The school will let me stay home. But when you have your ruts, Chris?"

"I know. I'll just need to concentrate hard enough to make sure I get them on Fridays every time." He waggled his eyebrows.

Tom's tired face split into a lovely smile.

"Shower. And food," he demanded, and Chris picked him up to fulfill his every wish.

**

The next day Tom got his period. But rather than worry about it like he had before, he simply plucked a few tampons from the box under the sink in Chris's bathroom and slipped one in. In the mirror, he studied his flat stomach, rubbing his navel and imagining himself big with Chris's child. His heart race with happiness at the possibility.

Not quite yet. But eventually, yes. He wanted kids with his mate.

But how would they avoid a pregnancy until he was ready?

**

Chris's rut hit on a Thursday.

Feeling it like a jolt in his stomach, Tom exited the bus at the stop nearest Chris's house and sprinted the rest of the way, his backpack jostling with every step. All thoughts of school fled his mind as he ran up the porch steps, gasping for air. He fished out his key from the ring connected to his bag and unlocked the door. Chris was stumbling into the living room, naked and sporting an erection, eyes bruised and glazed.

"Daddy," Tom whispered. He barely had time to drop his bag and lock the door when Chris grabbed him and flipped him over the arm of the sofa. Two days. Dozens of knots, Tom's body as exhausted and depleted of fluids as Chris's was by the end of the cycle. With cum leaking out of him, veins of it streaming down his thighs, Tom pulled out his planner and marked the days, looking at the months ahead, hoping to figure out when they would sync.

He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to hide his mated status. He was friendly with all his teachers and was always doing extra credit work, so his classes weren't suffering for it. But would anyone begin to get suspicious?

Helping Chris into the shower later in the day, he sincerely hoped no one did. How could any of them understand their bond? How could any of them know what he felt for this man? Deep in his chest?

They couldn't, he decided, lathering Chris's hair and kissing his collarbones. Not unless they experienced it themselves.

**

When Tom wasn't at school, he was with Chris and the bike crew. The bonfires continued into the fall, Tom more comfortable with hanging out with the other girls when not with Chris. He was starting to spend more time with Isabel, who came over sometimes on the weekends. She and Tom would bake in the kitchen while Chris and Jake talked business out in the garage. She showed him some recipes for lemon cake and strawberry creams, cinnamon bread and apple tarts. Tom memorized them all, laughing with her when something came out of the oven just right, both sharing a piece and then taking some out to the boys.

On the way, Tom had unconsciously run his hand down her forearm that morning, fascinated by the swirls and the colors. But he'd snatched his hand back, embarrassed at his lack of manners.

"It's alright," she'd said, extending her elbow. "You can touch."

Shyly, Tom dragged his fingers down her skin.

"They're so different from Daddy's," he said softly. "I love all the flowers. And the tears."

"Women are connected to both, I think," she said. "Tears feed flowers, flowers are born of us. They bloom in our blood. They sprout in our lungs. You ever feel that way?"

Tom had smiled, lashes fluttering as he fought back his tears. "Yes," he said. "I have felt that way."

Back inside, Tom quietly mustered up the courage to ask her about her first mate.

"He was lovely," she said, smiling, legs curled under her at the kitchen table. Her long brown hair was plaited over a shoulder, her tattooed arms and chest exposed in her white tank top. "Matthew. He looked a lot like your Daddy, actually. Tall and big. But he had brown hair. We mated when I was seventeen and he was twenty-one. Such wonderful *possession*." She winked at Tom. "You know the way."

Tom giggled and nodded. He broke an apple tart in half and handed her a piece.

"But how did you get over the separation from him? That pain? Sometimes Chris leaves the room and I have to stop myself from following him out. Because I ache when we're apart. My chest hurts." He frowned, hoping he didn't sound stupid.

"Mm. If your bond is this strong now, it will only get stronger. Like psychic ability strong." She chuckled and bit into the tart.

"Well, lately, I've been able to tell when he gets his ruts. I can feel it, even from home."

Her brown eyes flashed to his, brow puckered in curiosity.

"You know, it's said that only mated pairs where one of the individuals is a Dual can feel when their partner is about to go into heat or rut."

Tom swallowed around the clump of tart in his throat, cheeks flaming red. She touched his wrist gently.

“Are you a Dual, Tom?”

“Um. W-well. It’s...it’s not so—.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, Tom. Jesus Christ.” She rose from her chair and reached for him. He jumped up into her embrace, falling against her with a small sob. She stroked his hair.

“You can’t tell anyone, Isabel. You can’t.”

“Shh. It’s okay. I won’t say a thing. Did Chris know at first?”

Tom pulled back and she cupped his face. He shook his head.

“No. The way we met...there wasn’t really a way for me to tell him. And I didn’t know I was an omega until he smelled me. And when I got my first heat, he came to me like he promised. I had told him I wanted him as my alpha. It was all prearranged. But well, he was surprised.”

She smiled, nodding. “He liked it? He kept your secret?”

“He loves it,” Tom said, laughing as he wiped at his tears.

“That man,” she said, sighing. They sat down again. “I always knew he was a softie. But Tom, why were you keeping it secret?”

In soft tones, he told her about his mom and what she’d made him promise when he was a little boy. Isabel’s face hardened in much the same way Chris’s had, her fury softened only by the delicate lines of her face. No gruff beard or furry brows to match it entirely.

“You mustn’t hide it.”

“But I have no choice. At least not until I’m a bit older. Until we’re ready for babies.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” she whispered. “There’s plenty of time for that. So tell me. How do you like to be referred as? A boy? A girl? Do you have a different name?”

“No. My name is Tom. And I most of the time identify as male. But I do feel that in a quieter, more gentle part of my heart, I’m a girl. Chris asked the same thing. And I explained it to him. He talks to me in male and female pronouns. Calls me his boy, or his princess.” He blushed and ducked his head, but she was smiling at him so sweetly, he knew it was okay to keep going. “I’m so safe with him. The safest I’ve ever felt in my entire life. He protects me and loves me. I was lucky to have met him, to have known him. To have him as my mate.”

“I’m so happy you know this affection, this love. To have so cold a mother...” She shook her head. She was disappointed and angry, and that was without any mention of what Jeff had done to him. She narrowed her eyes playfully at him and poked his arm. “I always knew you weren’t twenty-one.”

Tom tossed his head back. “Guilty.

“So how old are you?”

He shied away. “I’d rather not say.”

“So, *very* young. Close to eighteen?”

“Hmm. Yes.”

“You’re both little sneaks.” But she winked and held a hand to her lips. Their secret. “I have so many questions!” she laughed.

“You can ask!” Tom grinned, his heart so light at finally being able to share his other self with another woman.

“Do you have periods?”

“Yes. I got my first period at thirteen. I learned on YouTube how to put in a tampon.”

Her face fell. “No.”

He shrugged. “YouTube is very helpful. I was very regular before my heats. Now, I get a period after my heats hit.”

“So that’ll be how you know if you’re pregnant.”

Tom nodded.

“Tom, thank you for telling me. For opening up to me. I know that Chris knew, and your mom, by default. But I hope you know you can come to me if you need anything, or have any questions.”

“Thank you, Isabel.”

She squeezed his hand. And then her eyes widened. “The cookies!”

Tom laughed as he followed her into the kitchen.

Loosed Arrows, Feathers Flying

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

The season slowly turned cold. Tom was nearly done with his semester, having done extremely well considering his multiple absences. He and Chris continued their clandestine mating, their bond strengthening and growing. Tom liked to think of it as a garden, bursting between them with suckle flowers and green vines, winding them together so that their fates would never part. To Tom, it was like he carried a piece of Chris with him everywhere.

The holidays came. Tom spent the bare minimum time at his own house, where a gaunt-looking Jeff would sit stiffly in the living room, nursing both fractured ankle and broken jaw. His tepid silence meant Tom was able to sneak in and out of the kitchen more often, often catching sight of his mother. She'd smile at him, distractedly, before turning her attention back to Jeff, preparing him shakes and spooning him goopy food that seeped through the wires in his mouth.

"Hey, mom. I'm going to spend Thanksgiving with a friend this year, okay?"

"Sure, fine." She didn't even turn to look at him.

Pleased and beyond caring, Tom started planning his meal with Chris at home, texting Isabel and inviting her and Jake over. He was skimming webpages one day for recipes at the kitchen table, legs curled under him so that a peek of pink panties showed at his hip, when his laptop died abruptly. He whined quietly, frustrated with the machine, tapping on the unresponsive power button. Chris stood from the couch and kissed him on the mouth.

"Do you want to come with me or do you want to be surprised?"

Tom frowned. "What do you mean?"

Chris smiled. "You can pick or I will."

Still confused, Tom shrugged his shoulders delicately. "I guess I'll pick?"

"Go change, kitten." Chris smacked his ass lightly as Tom darted away.

Ten minutes later, they were on the road. Chris pulled into the parking lot of the biggest electronics store and they were shown by an employee to the computer section. Tom's eyes widened at all the models, trailing his fingers over the gleaming covers, the machines available in an array of various sizes and colors. When the associate stepped away for a moment, Tom leaned in and whispered discreetly, "These are too much, Daddy."

"No, baby, they're not. First of all, I could buy like four of these at once if I wanted. But I'm not. I'm buying one. And it's for you. You've been struggling with that piece of crap computer for months now. I can get you a better one."

The associate returned and they fell silent. In the end, Tom chose a silver laptop that the employee assured him would sync perfectly with his phone, that the two devices were made by the same

company that developed their technology to stream and function seamlessly with each other. Adding a protective hard shell case and a pair of soundproof earphones, Tom watched with wide eyes as Chris paid for the items and warranty plan with cash. Mouth slightly agape, the bright blue bag clutched to his chest as they walked back to the parked bike, Tom seemed in shock.

Chris laughed, hugging him around the shoulders. “Babe, are you okay?”

Tom nodded numbly, the feeble winter sun crowning his curls in gold. His breaths puffed out in front of him. “Yes, Daddy. I think I’m okay.” He looked down, his long fingered hands spread wide on the computer box, protective of it already.

Chris frowned. “What is it?”

Tom shuffled his feet, shrugging. “I guess...I guess I can’t help but remember what...he said about you buying me things. That—that it made me a—.”

“Don’t say it,” Chris warned.

“—whore.”

Chris sighed and took the bag out of Tom’s arms, prying his fingers loose from around the edges. He took his hands and sat him on the seat of the bike.

“Baby—.”

“Yes, Daddy?” Tom looked up at him, hair fluffed gently by the breeze.

“Baby, is Jeff someone that matters to you?”

Tom’s face collapsed in disgust. “No, Daddy!”

“Is he someone whose opinion you take seriously?”

“No.”

“Is he someone that you know is mentally manipulative? Hurting you in the only ways he knows he can?”

Tom’s brows drew down, his lovely face saddened. “Yes, Daddy. He is.”

Chris squatted in front of him, holding both wrists. “And have I ever called you a whore?”

The softest whisper, downturned lashes. “No, Daddy.”

“I’ve called you my little slut, right? But that’s because I love when you’re slutty for only me. It’s a part of our intimacy, being open with each other physically. Not being afraid to show that emotion. But you’re not a whore, Tom. I buy you things because I love you. And because I want you to have the best. What makes how I buy you things different from other couples? Are they whores too?”

“No.”

“So, this computer, and all the other things I have and will ever buy you are because you deserve them and because you mean everything to me. Not because you perform sexual acts. That’s vulgar and I don’t like it.”

He winked and Tom gave a small smile.

“Okay, Tom?”

“Okay, Chris.” He bit his lip and took a deep breath. “Thank you for being so patient with me. What he said about my mom really hurt, but I’ve been trying to get over it. I think I know how she feels for me without him helping me decide that. Sometimes it’s hard to tell yourself the truth, I guess.”

Chris shook his head. “We don’t get to choose who our families are. Blood is nothing, or it’s everything, with the right person.”

Tom leaned down and nuzzled his cheek, the bristles of Chris’s stubble tickling him. “You’re my family, Chris. I’ve never doubted it.”

He pulled back and they stared at each other, the sun filtering through Tom’s irises in a way that made Chris’s heart skip. And even though it was broad daylight and they were in the middle of a crowded parking lot, Chris sat up and kissed him softly. Tom leaned into it, his thin little bow-mouth pursing sweetly.

“Now let’s get home and you can show this old man how to use this thing, huh?” He patted the bag on the ground and Tom grinned.

**

Thanksgiving break was a welcome respite from Tom’s end of semester studies. Most evenings he liked to spend time in the kitchen while Chris worked on his bikes out in the garage. And after Chris shuffled in and washed his hands, Tom felt a surge of pride swell in his chest when he presented him with dinner. Chris would moan with pleasure at every first bite and Tom giggled, standing to serve him more when he finished. It was different from when he tried to cook at his mother’s house. He always felt so inadequate and ill-prepared there. What he made usually ended up sitting in plastic containers in the refrigerator, his mother too tired to heat it up, Jeff too scornful. But at Chris’s house, the kitchen felt entirely his, where he experimented with different plates, Chris devouring everything.

“You’re going to get me fat,” Chris accused sleepily one night after another good meal.

Tom, bouncing on his lap, cried out softly and clenched with a violent shudder, spurting a hot gush of cum on Chris’s chest.

“Mm,” he breathed, sweaty and content. “And I’m just getting started on my baking skills, Daddy.”

“Goddamn,” Chris groaned and flipped them fast, pumping hard into him to finish with a grunt and plenty of cozy kisses.

Isabel and Jake came over early Thursday afternoon, and she and Tom got to work on the food for the big meal. Tom’s first attempt to cook a turkey was surprisingly successful. Juices sloshing and golden-brown, he and Isabel wore mismatched mitts as they carried the heavy pan to the top of the oven.

“Watch your fingers, honey,” she said, arms straining.

“I will, mom,” Tom gasped, letting the pan clatter softly to the surface of the stove.

He froze and turned wide eyes on her, cheeks reddening.

“I’m sorry,” he said, slapping a hand over his mouth.

She blinked her eyes, caught a little off guard, but then her face softened and she reached for him. She hugged him to her chest, and Tom soaked in the feel of her soft bosom, so gentle and feminine. He realized he couldn’t remember the last woman he’d hugged apart from her.

“Don’t go apologizing. It’s more than alright. I don’t mind it. You call me that all you want. I would be honored.”

Tom squeezed her waist, eyes falling shut as he sighed it once more. “Mom.”

When Chris and Jake came inside, they noticed their wet eyes and silly grins, but said nothing apart from asking if they were okay. Isabel hugged Tom round his shoulders and nodded yes, they were just fine.

Chris and Jake helped with chopping things here and there, eating most of everything and generally getting in Tom and Isabel’s way. But the potatoes were mashed and the turkey stuffed and the rolls buttered and Tom finally collapsed in a chair and promptly fell asleep for an hour, flakes of something green stuck to his cheek. He roused again once everything was ready to be served. Everyone held hands around the table and Chris said grace, peeking up at Tom at the end. Tom’s heart swelled at the sight of them, his mate, Isabel and Jake, these people who a year ago he had never met and now felt like his closest family. After their meal and a slice of pumpkin pie—store bought—Jake and Isabel shooed them into the living room and promised to clean up. With water running and dishes clanking in the sink, Tom cuddled on the sofa with Chris, both too full to even move.

“Mick wants me to do a job for him next week,” Chris said, voice deep with fatigue.

“What kind of job?”

Chris briefly explained the arrangement with the liquor stores and the fees the owners provided to the crew for protection.

“So you have to go collect a fee?”

“Yeah. But the books I have aren’t current with his latest updates. I have to take his word for it.”

Tom remained quiet, thumb drawing a half circle over Chris’s shoulder.

“Do you trust him, Daddy?”

Chris sighed and rested his head back. His pause made Tom think that maybe he didn’t.

“Yeah. I mean, sure I do. He’s our boss. He always looks after the crew.”

Tom lifted his head. “But, Daddy. Even you said that he’s been weird since you got out. And then there’s what happened between me and him.” He made a face and squeezed closer.

Chris cupped Tom’s head. “I know, baby. And that’s why there’s no way in hell I’m letting him near you.”

“But you’ll still do the job?”

“Yeah,” Chris said, a bit resignedly. “I’ll still do it. I kinda have to.”

“But aren’t you his second? Can’t someone else do it instead?”

Chris closed his eyes and appeared to have fallen into a doze when he said, "I have to do it. So I will."

They left it at that, a soft rain falling outside. On the kitchen table, a candle's burning wick fluttered from the wind whistling in through the cracked window, throwing long shadows over their sleeping forms, Isabel's soft laughter flowing in from the kitchen.

**

"You going over to see Mitchell this afternoon?"

Mick moved from one side of the garage to the other, boots sliding on the sandy concrete, one long-fingered tanned hand touching the gutted bike engine on the worktable.

Chris wiped his hands on a rag, watching him out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. Going down there early, before the bonfire tonight."

Mick crossed his arms and leaned against one of the bikes parked in the corner.

"Yeah. Yeah, your boy loves those, doesn't he?"

And as if bidden by the mere mention of him, Tom came bounding into the garage, bypassing Mick without seeing him.

He was wearing one of Chris's long-sleeved flannel shirts, the red and blue one, bare-legged, boots laced to mid-shin. It was cold outside, but the kitchen was probably warm, and Tom looked so beautiful with his blushing cheeks. His pink heart-shaped sunglasses were tangled in his curls. He had just come off a heat and Chris knew he was on his period. He flicked a glance at Mick, see if he could smell the blood on him. But Mick was smiling and staring at the floor, as unreadable as always.

Bouncing on his toes, Tom presented him with a napkin wrapped bundle in both hands.

"Daddy! You *have* to try one of these. They're so good!"

He skidded to a stop before Chris, unfolding the napkin. A handful of maple-brown cookies sat bundled within, and Chris took one. They were gooey and sweet and still warm.

"What are these?" he asked, mouth full.

Tom grinned. "Ginger molasses cookies. I sprinkled some sugar powder over the top of them. Do you like them, Daddy?" His face was wide and expectant, brows drawn up adorably.

"You got any of that for me?"

Mick's voice curled over to them from the corner, and Tom spun with a gasp.

When he saw who it was he jumped behind Chris, face burning.

"You ain't gotta hide from me. Come on out from behind there, it's alright!" Mick said, waving his arm forward, laughing to himself.

But Tom stayed put, peeking at him over Chris's shoulder, a hand curling in the back of his shirt. Chris turned to him, blocking him from Mick's sight. He threw an arm over his shoulder, pulling him closer.

"These are great, babe," he said quietly, so that only Tom could hear him. "Did you make more?"

Eyes down, Tom nodded. "Two more dozen."

"Keep them warm for me. I'll be right in." He kissed his forehead. Tom glanced at Mick before darting away and into the sunlight. At the door, he turned around and mouthed 'sorry' to Chris, who winked at him. He watched Tom go, finishing the rest of his cookie in silence.

Mick shook his head. "What in the world did you have to do to get that boy to call you daddy?"

Chris wiped his hands on the back of his jeans and spared Mick the briefest of glances. Already Tom's perfume was fading in the air inside the garage, heavy with gasoline and engine fluid. He returned his attention to his project. "I didn't do a damn thing. He likes to call me that."

Mick tilted his head knowingly. "And you like to hear it."

Chris said nothing. Internally, he wished Mick would get out of his sight.

"Listen, uh. Why don't I take Tom to the bonfire?"

Chris put his tool down and cut his stare over to Mick. Everything Jim had told him about Mick and the liquor store owner's son flooded Chris's mind, and he had to control his urge to jump across the table and throttle Mick if he so much as looked Tom's way again.

"You might get tied up at the job. Sometimes these things take longer than you expect." Mick stood and walked over to the table. "I can take him over when I go. He likes hanging with the girls. He'll be fine. We'll all wait for you. Anyway, I'll get out of your hair. Tell the kid I can pick him up later."

He patted the table in a quick motion, cutting the conversation short. Striding out, he climbed on his bike and it roared to life. Chris paused at the double doors and squinted into the late morning light. As soon as Mick was gone, he walked quickly up the path to the house and around the garden.

Tom was in the kitchen, squinting at his computer propped open on the counter, a cooking video demonstration playing on the screen. Hands swallowed by a clump of sticky dough, he looked up when Chris entered.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't know he was here."

Chris hugged him from behind. "It's okay, baby. But listen, go get dressed. We're leaving in a bit."

Tom craned his neck to look at him. "But I thought you had your job to do."

"I do. But you're coming with me."

Tom frowned, and then glanced around the kitchen, where he had something of a baking factory going. "I just put a batch in, Daddy."

"Go on and get dressed. They'll be done by the time we're ready to leave."

Tom quickly washed his hands and lay a moist towel over the bowl with dough.

After he was dressed, he took out the finished cookies and lay them on the counter to cool.

Riding into town, Chris realized they were early for his appointment with the store owner, but

something about the entire exchange with Mick had left him on edge. He couldn't pinpoint what it had been about their conversation that spooked him, but the possibility of Mick arriving unexpectedly at his house while Tom was alone had Chris bursting into action.

Behind him Tom squealed happily and tightened his hold around Chris's waist. Chris turned and saw Tom's finger pointing out of the corner of his eye to a small corner bookstore in the plaza across the street from the liquor store.

He was early. The owner wasn't expecting him for a while. And the parking lot at Mitchell's was full, people probably stocking up on liquor for that night's parties and the weekend ahead. He would wait for a lull in foot traffic. He guided the bike to the left and parked outside of the bookstore. Tom jumped off and left the helmet on the seat. Chris followed him in.

"Hey there," said the woman behind the counter. Tom shot past her with a quick hello, disappearing behind the towering bookshelves. "Little brother?" she asked, smiling at Chris.

He nodded easily. "Yeah. He's visiting from out of town. Loves to read."

She reached under the counter and brought out a slip of paper. "Here's a coupon for buy two get one free. He'd probably like that."

Chris thanked her and went to find Tom.

He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, running a long finger over the spines of the books on the bottom shelf. Chris squatted next to him.

"Babe, you can't call me Daddy in here, okay?" he whispered.

Tom's head snapped up. "Why not?"

"Because that lady thinks you're my little brother. Go with it."

Tom shrugged. "Okay."

Chris meant to only drop Tom off and let him meander in the bookstore while he collected the fee from the liquor store, but he couldn't bring himself to head outside to his bike. Something in his gut told him to stay put. He kept walking among the bookcases closest to the door, peeking between the shelves at the liquor store across the street. Customers came and went, weighed down with cases of beer and bottles of wine. He could barely make out the figure of Mitchell behind the glass-encased counter. Chris didn't like how he kept glancing into the street, head turning left and right. What was he looking for? Had someone tipped him off that Chris was coming? The crew liked to keep the dates and times of their collection visits a secret, otherwise the owners might begin to make themselves scarce when their payment was due.

He hesitated, pretending to read the titles, picking a book up at random and absently turning it over in his hand as he watched the store from under his brow. There didn't appear to be any sign of any police activity, no cruisers patrolling. But unmarked cars could be anywhere and the cops were getting smarter with how they concealed even those. There was no one standing idly on the sidewalk or talking into a phone down the block. But undercover cops were good at hiding in plain sight. One might even be inside the store, waiting.

The dash across the street on his bike seemed suddenly foolhardy, rash and risky. Especially with Tom depending on him to come back. If the parole board even suspected that he was up to no good, Tom would be waiting for a long time. Chris stood with his arms crossed, the bookstore cashier talking with another customer, their voices happy and light and full of information about

this or that new release.

Something was off. This wasn't like the handful of jobs he'd done since getting released from prison. He handled those well, never needing to use brute force with the store owners, who all respected him, and appreciated when Chris showed up rather than someone like Johnny.

"Chris," Tom called and Chris followed his voice to the back of the store. Tom was standing on his tiptoes, hand straining to the highest row of books. Chris reached for him and brought the book down, seeing that he already had half a dozen stacked on the floor by his feet.

"I thought you were coming back for me," Tom said, stooping to pick up his books.

"I don't know," Chris murmured, helping him with the books. "There's something about this I don't like."

They approached the counter and the woman started scanning the books.

"Oh, this is a good one! Hey, you like cooking? Me too! I couldn't believe what happens at the end of this one. And he won't release the new book until March." She made a face and Tom giggled. She scanned their coupon and Chris pulled out his wallet.

"I sure wish they'd move from in front of my sign," she murmured, squinting out the big glass storefront window.

"Who?" Tom said, taking his bag of books.

"That darn officer. He's parked right in front of my sign about the buy two get one free sale. Been there most of the morning." She sighed and accepted Chris's money, opening the register for his change. But Chris was hardly aware of her anymore. His blood ran cold and he turned to look for the car, spotting it by the long row of hedges lining the plaza, just in front of the bookstore sign. A midsize vehicle with bald black rims and three low antennae above the back window.

He cursed.

It wasn't the standard Crown Victoria that most undercover cops used. Wasn't even a Ford. But the antennae and tinted windows confirmed it.

Chris put on his most disinterested face and smiled politely at the woman as she handed him his change.

"Thanks!" Tom said to her, casting Chris a side look. He picked up so easily on Chris's moods, it scared Chris sometimes.

Once outside, Chris guided Tom to his bike, whispering for him to stay quiet. He didn't know exactly what the cops were looking for. If they expected to arrest Chris just because he walked into a liquor store, they had something else coming. But he had absolutely no intention of doing that now. As far as they could see he was just buying some books. They might not even pay him any attention with Tom by his side. If they were looking for anything it would be for a single man on a motorcycle. Not a man with a teenaged boy.

"Daddy—."

"Quiet now, baby."

Tom obediently closed his mouth.

On the bike, Chris started the ignition and watched in his side mirror for any movement from the cop car. Tom shifted behind him, bunching the bag of books between his legs. He cuddled against Chris and waited. Seeing nothing, Chris put the bike in gear and drove out of the plaza as calmly as he could, eyes glued to the mirror. There was no tail, and he breathed a little easier after crossing four intersections without incident. He made it back home in record time, securing the bike in the garage and hurrying Tom into the house.

Tom went to the couch and took out his books, lining them in a row on the coffee table, eyes darting to Chris every few seconds where he stood staring out the living room window. Chris knew he was probably making him nervous, but he was angrier and more afraid than he'd been since before prison; prison, where he was caged into a space no bigger than a box, windows so high up he couldn't see the sky every day; prison, where there were so many rules among the inmates that one wrong step and you might get stabbed in the showers.

There was no way in hell he was going back there.

Mick had to have set him up. All that talk about how Chris would probably get 'tied up' at the liquor store, how it would probably take longer than he expected, Chris realized it was more literal than he originally thought.

Mick would have made the call to the police anonymously. There was a strict rule that the crew didn't work with cops under any circumstances, and even Mick wouldn't break that guideline. Even if he described Chris, Chris could always insist he was only there to buy Tom books. He wasn't even near the liquor store, didn't even make any kind of attempt to approach it.

The fact of the matter was that he had almost been caught. Prison had almost become his home again, rather than this little house with its sudden transformation of food smells and cleanliness and Tom who was staring at him now with guarded blue eyes.

Chris dropped down beside him.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, pulling him into a hug. Tom went willingly, clutching at him. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't scare me," Tom said, voice muffled in his shirt. "I know you're worried and it makes me worried."

Chris pulled away and cupped Tom's face. "No, baby. I'm not worried anymore. We did nothing wrong. They can't prove I was there to collect a fee. I took you to the bookstore and we came home. End of story."

"And the book lady will back us up," Tom added quickly.

Chris's heart swelled at the hopefulness in his voice. He nodded. "Yes, baby. She will."

"So what do we do now?"

Chris stood, fury settling over his heart. "Nothing. We go to the bonfire. Can your baking wait a little longer?"

"Of course. The dough will be fine."

"Good. We'll leave in an hour."

Only, the hour quickly turned into two when Chris was unable to keep from crowding Tom over

the edge of the bed, grabbing him before he changed clothes.

“Daddy,” Tom murmured, clinging to Chris, his small frame bouncing under Chris’s heavy bulk. His feet, toes wiggling inside black socks, crossed behind Chris’s back, lifting his hips to meet his thrusts. Chris kissed him hard, clamping lightly on his bottom lip, Tom groaning at the bite. Over his thin waist and inner thighs, he bore the evidence of Chris’s other bites, differently shaded bruises depending on how old they were.

“Make me cum, Daddy,” Tom breathed, cheeks red. “I want your cum inside me. Bursting with it. Make me big with your babies.”

“Fuck,” Chris moaned, hips moving faster. Tom cried out, head thrown back, and Chris latched onto his neck. He sucked hard, using both teeth and tongue to mark him good.

“Fuck, Daddy...yes!”

Chris felt the sluggish pulse of Tom’s climax between their bellies, his cum always spilling thickly, always so much of it. The air permeated with the scent of his pussy and his period blood, and Chris took a deep inhale, feeling his mind begin to spin with want.

Tom’s slicked inner walls hugged him tight, milking his cock and bringing him closer to the edge. He trembled, eyes rolling back, and Chris hugged him harder, sucking at his neck.

He rammed in two more times and then groaned, his cock swelling inside Tom as he released.

“More,” Tom murmured, dazed. His hips wiggled lazily, trying to get Chris to go deeper.

“Take it, baby,” Chris said, easing up on his hands, loving how wrecked Tom looked.

His hands drifted to Chris’s ass, cupping him. “More, Daddy.”

Chris shuddered, skin feeling tight, another wave of pleasure rolling through him. “I’m still going, baby.” And he was, the long streams of cum drizzling off to tiny spurts, filling Tom, who mewled and demanded kisses.

They showered quickly, Chris’s tense mood returning despite Tom’s gentle hands on his body.

Tom dressed in his favorite black pair of jeans and his black biker boots. He tossed on a white shirt under one of Chris’s smallest plaid button downs. Chris dressed warmly in jeans and a white shirt, a dark brown leather jacket on last. In the inside pocket, he stashed a blade.

The skies darkened so early in the winter. Gone were the monsoon rains that rolled in every evening in July and August, a great shuddering frenzy that left the earth gutted and the air purified.

Only Jake Harper and Jim and Mick were at the bonfire. Isabel was probably inside. None of the young guys and their girlfriends were there yet. They usually didn’t arrive until much later.

Tom’s black boots and tight jeans and mascara had distracted Chris long enough from his anger to push Tom against the wall and suck at the same bruise on his neck. It was turning into a big one, just to the side of his throat, dark already, showing clearly to whom he belonged. Tom was more than happy to sport it, touching it every few minutes, eyes drifting to Chris.

But Chris’s blood was pumping with more than just lust for Tom, who with one look could alleviate the delicate control he had over his anger. Tom knew Chris would never hurt him, so there was no fear in his eyes as he sidled up to Chris and embraced him, pinching his cheeks and

smoothing over his stormy brow. But once Chris turned away from that innocent face, his wrath returned, dimming the edges of his vision in red, teeth gritted against the thought that that fucking son of a bitch actually tried to get him arrested again. And for what? Because Chris was well-liked among the crew? Because he had figured out that Mick had set him up the first time and sent him off to prison? Or was it because—.

Chris stopped in his tracks, Tom running into him from behind.

“Daddy?” he asked, squeezing his hand. His pink fingernails stood out sharply against Chris’s leather jacket.

Mick wanted Tom. Just like he wanted that store owner’s son. And he got rid of the father one way or another, the fate of the boy unknown. Only now he was trying to get rid of Chris.

Why not fucking kill me? he thought. Why send me to prison, where I could stew and seethe and eventually get out and come after him?

Because he knows how much you hated prison, and because by then he would have gotten what he wanted.

“Fuck.” He continued forward, Tom running to keep up with him.

“Daddy—.”

“I think we should go back,” Chris said suddenly.

Tom’s brows puckered, but then a booming voice sounded behind them.

“You’re here!”

Mick stood there with Jim and Jake, each with a beer in hand. The bonfire was only just a crackling pile of snapping wood in the background. And if Chris wasn’t mistaken, there was a look of quickly masked disbelief in Mick’s eyes, staring at Chris when he probably imagined he would be in a holding cell by now.

“Yeah,” Chris said, tugging Tom forward. “We made it.”

Jim frowned. “Hey, are you okay? You look a little—.”

“You set me up,” Chris whispered, eyes hard on Mick. “You think I wouldn’t notice? The damn cop sitting across the *street*!”

Tom flinched, Chris’s raised voice reverberating loudly over the yard.

“Now, wait a minute. Why don’t we go talk in private—,” Mick started.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Chris said, voice low again. His face was red with anger, and he dropped Tom’s hand. “They can hear everything.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Jake cut in. “Mick set you up? When?”

“Six years ago and again today. Only this time I was smart enough to catch the signs.”

Jim and Jake glanced at each other, and then at Mick, whose face had gone cold, bent brow glaring at Chris.

“You’re just being paranoid. You have no proof,” he spit out, fingers gripping his beer bottle.

“Yeah, only my gut instinct. And it’s been telling me that you’re a goddamn snake.”

Jim was looking at Mick like he’d just killed a puppy in front of them. “What did you do?”

Mick turned on him. “Nothing! Chris has just been out of the game for a while. He’s gone soft. Especially with his new play thing,” he said, pointing his chin at Tom.

Chris stepped in front of him. “Don’t you fucking talk about him. And don’t change the subject.”

“Wait,” Jake interrupted. “I’m still confused. How did he set you up?”

“Jim, you’ve been second in my stead while I was locked up. Has Mitchell O’Hare ever been late with a payment?”

Jim shrugged. “Not that I recall. I don’t have the books in front me, but I know we’ve never sent anyone to collect from him. He’s always on time.”

“Exactly. Only Mick sent me to collect from him today. And Mitchell looked nervous as hell. Maybe it was that cop car sitting across the street, scoping the place.”

“I checked the books just this morning,” Jake said. “Mitch is current.”

They all turned to Mick, who was glowering at Chris, jaw set tightly.

“You little bitch,” he whispered, and then sprang on Chris, bringing his beer bottle down on his head. The others jumped back, even Tom, who was stunned to find himself splattered with beer, pieces of dark brown glass falling over his chest.

Chris grunted, but recovered quickly, dropping low and tackling Mick around the middle. They fell to the ground in a dusty heap, scrabbling like animals. It reminded Tom of a scene from a movie he watched at a friend’s house, an illegal betting ring where rabid dogs snarled and bit at each other in clouds of dust.

But then his shock subsided and he jumped forward. “Chris!”

Jim grabbed his arm.

“You don’t want to get in their way, kid. Stand back. Let Chris handle this without worrying about you.”

Fear clutching his chest, Tom watched as Chris landed blow after blow on Mick’s face, the older man taking the hits better than Tom would have hoped.

Mick kicked at Chris and they rolled.

“What the fuck did I ever do you?” Tom heard Chris yell between grunts. Mick threw his elbow across Chris’s face and he collapsed to the side. Mick jumped to his feet.

“You’ve done nothing, you little shit. You’re just in my way.”

Chris struggled to his feet, touching his brow to find his fingers bloodied.

They ran at each other again, and Jim, Tom, and Jake shuffled back a few steps.

“Daddy,” Tom gasped, tracking every blow between them. Chris was bleeding from his right eyebrow, sweat spilling down his face despite the cold air. Mick tore at his hair and Chris screamed, punching Mick’s ribs until he let go.

Staggering apart, they stood a few feet away from each other, stances wired with rage. Mick pointed a dusty finger at Tom. “That boy is different.” Tom felt his spine tighten with chills. “He smells different. Moves different. What is it, boy? Hm? You can tell me. Go on.” Tom shook his head, speechless. Jim and Jake kept ahold of each arm, but it was obvious that Mick saw no one but him. He smiled bloody and took a crooked step in his direction. Chris growled.

“Yeah, you’re different. Couldn’t put my finger on it. And then you ran into the garage today and I finally knew. I smelled it. You were *bleeding*.”

Tom gasped. “No.”

“You still are, aren’t you? Because you’re a Dual. And you have a cunt that bleeds. And by God, I wanna *lick it*.”

He lunged toward Tom with a snarl but Chris jumped in between, hand stuffed in the inside of his jacket, emerging with a sharp blade in his fist. He spun Mick and held him with one arm by the neck, screaming brokenly as he stuck the knife in Mick’s chest, quick, hard, deep violent thrusts, the sound like loosed arrows, feathers flying.

Mick grunted with every stab, a half dozen shanks, prison-learned and adopted.

Blood bubbled from Mick’s mouth and his knees buckled. Chris let him fall, gasping ragged in the cold air. Plumes of his breath spread out before him, revealing in slow bursts the shocked faces of Tom and Jim and Jake. All stood to the side, all with eyes wide on the scene before them.

But on the ground, Mick started laughing, slow and cruel.

Moving fast, Chris straddled Mick’s waist and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, both spitting in all their anger.

“What happened to the kid?” Chris rasped. He shook him, and more bloody spittle erupted from Mick’s mouth. “The owner’s son? What happened to him?”

Mick grinned. “You know about that, huh? I was hoping you didn’t. It would put you off my scent with what I planned to do to your boy.”

Chris back handed him. “What happened to him!”

“I fucked him hard. Tore him open. Oh god, he was tight. So sweet and tight. But now he’s buried twenty miles east of here. Tribal land. Protected by the government and restricted by the Indians.” He laughed low, blood oozing from between his teeth. “Family thinks he ran away after his dad was killed. They’ll never find him. No one goes up there.”

Jim and Jake looked at each other, mouths open in astonishment.

“You son of a bitch,” Chris growled, face inches from Mick’s. “You’re never going to lay your hands on my boy.”

He lifted his arm, hand curling into a fist, just as Mick, lightning fast, scrambled a hand into his leather jacket and pulled out a gun. Chris landed his blow just as the gun went off and Tom screamed, struggling with Jim but the man wouldn’t let him go.

The blast ricocheted loudly, startling a flock of birds from their nests in the big tree at the edge of the yard. The fire crackled, and everyone was silent, eyes glued on the two men on the ground.

A door clapped open back at the house and Isabel's cry of alarm echoed over them.

Chris blinked and looked down. The side of his shirt was blown through, a bloom of red soaking into the white thread.

Even Mick's eyes were wide, looking down at where he'd shot Chris.

"I—I...I," he stuttered, mouth opening and closing stupidly. "I just wanted to fuck him, is all. I won't kill him."

With a low growl, Chris grabbed the sides of Mick's head and gave his neck a quick twist, snapped the bone, the sick cracking sound almost louder than the gunshot.

Heaving, Chris let Mick's head fall back, thudding hollowly on the dirt. He clutched his side and collapsed, legs sprawled out over Mick's.

"No!" Tom yelled, finally disentangling himself from Jim's hold. He rushed to Chris, dropping to his knees beside him. Jake, Jim, and Isabel followed close behind. "Daddy, no. No, please. Chris!"

Chris blinked up at the sky, evening out from autumn orange into a deeper purple, the firelight casting shadows over his face. He grimaced when Tom pulled up his shirt, but lifted his head to look.

The bullet seemed to have only grazed him, slicing into the meat of his waist, blood spilling from the torn skin.

"Just a flesh wound," Jim said, sticking a bandana over it. Chris stifled a grunt.

"Hurts like a bitch," he gasped.

Tom was cupping his face, eyes brimming with tears. He brushed back Chris's hair, flicking his gaze over every part of his face, fingers getting bloodied by the cut on his brow. Isabel dropped down beside him, her flowing skirts and curly hair whipping in the sharp breeze.

"Daddy," he whispered, a tear falling into the parched earth. "Daddy, you can't! Oh god—."

"He'll be alright, kid," Jim said, pressing down on the wound. "He won't need a hospital. Jake's got a first aid kit inside. We'll patch him up in a minute. Stay down, Chris." He kept a hand on Chris's shoulder.

Chris lifted his arm to Tom's waist, the contact comforting him.

"He's dead," Jake said. He squatted by Mick's body, two fingers on his neck.

"Of course he's dead," Jim said bluntly. "We all heard the spine snap. Not to mention he had about a minute left from the shanking."

Tom sniffed, wiping his nose with the back of his hand, unknowingly smearing a stripe of Chris's own blood across his cheek.

"I'm okay, baby. Don't cry."

Tom let out another sob, shaking his head. Isabel wrapped him close, shushing him gently. She

petted his hair as he cried.

“He can’t die, mom. He can’t.”

“He won’t, my darling. The boys will fix him up like new.”

Jake returned a minute later with the first aid kit. Both men knelt over Chris, Tom shuffling over to palm his head. They cleaned the wound and bandaged it tight, Chris’s breath hissing through his teeth with every each touch. And then they cleaned and put a butterfly bandage on his cut eyebrow.

They hauled him to his feet, Tom jumping out of the way, trailing after them with his arms around Isabel. One on each side, they walked Chris into Jake’s house. The inner paneling was dark, with long shadows in the corners and across the cluttered walls. Tom rubbed his arms, the air somehow colder inside than out. They took Chris to a back bedroom, laying him down on the creaky bed. He was half-conscious, the loss of blood making him pale and weak, his teeth gritted against the pain from the fight and the gun shot. Hands bloodied, Tom realized the knife was probably still out in the dirt sticky and blackened.

Isabel hurried about with clean pillows and more towels to dab at the remaining blood.

“Here,” Jake said, searching in his jacket pocket. “Grabbed some Vicodin from my stash. Take one.”

“No,” Chris gritted, eyes on Tom, who stood at the foot of the bed, looking like a lost little ghost, a stripe of blood on his cheek.

Isabel bent close. “No one’s gonna hurt him, Chris. The only one who would is lying outside. He’ll stay here with you. Jake and Jim will take care of the body, let the crew know what happened. It was self-defense. You did nothing wrong.”

Breathing hard through his nose, Chris took a moment, and then nodded tersely. Jake gave him the pill and a chug of his beer. Wincing, Chris fell back on the bed.

Turning to Tom, Jake said, “You can lock the door from the inside, if that makes you feel better. But Isa will be here if you need anything. Me and Jim’ll be outside. I’m sorry,” he finished, glancing once more at Chris. Both men left, Isabel hugging him one last time before following them out. Tom sprang into motion. He removed Chris’s boots, setting them in the corner, and then shrugged out of his own, crawling in beside Chris.

Chris’s eyes were half-lidded, already going distant from the pain medication. But he blinked and focused on Tom, tongue darting out to lick his dry lips.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

Tears sprang to Tom’s eyes again and he smiled, brushing Chris’s hair back, cradling his face.

“Yes, Daddy. But I was so scared. I thought he killed you.”

“Fuck if that man was going to take my life. And with a gun no less. Coward,” he said softly, closing his eyes. His chest rose and fell, breaths ragged. “Is it bad? It still hurts like a son of a bitch.”

Tom looked down at the bandage. “Of course it does. But the guys don’t seem super worried.”

“Probably fucked up my tattoo,” Chris murmured, voice fading fast. The pill was working on his

system, his eyes closing against his will. "Sleep with me. Baby. Don't leave me."

"I won't, Daddy. I'm staying right here with you."

When Chris drifted off, Tom lay shivering against Chris's body heat. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he pulled over their bodies the soft Mexican blanket Isabel had left for them. It didn't cover Chris as much, but Tom was freezing. He wrapped it around himself and watched Chris breathe, a hand splayed over his chest to feel the hard beat of his heart thumping against his palm.

He couldn't sleep. Especially after hearing the roar of more bikers arriving, voices outside the window, some shouting, some murmuring. What Jim and Jake told the others, Tom didn't know. And he didn't care. Chris was alive and Mick wasn't. Anything else, Tom wasn't concerned with.

Later, there was a knock at the door and Tom lifted his head.

It was Jim. "How is he?"

Tom let him in and Jim examined Chris, who was fast asleep.

"He'll need to rest for a few more days. But he should be able to return to normal things in a week. Believe me," he said, patting his own stomach. "I've had a slug or two in my own day."

Tom smiled, grateful for the ease he put Tom into after so shocking an event.

"We think he should stay here tonight. Maybe even tomorrow. He can't ride like this. I mean, he can, but it's gonna hurt like hell."

Tom nodded and thanked him.

"Oh, and when he wakes up," Jim said, almost out the door. "Tell him he's the boss now. Unanimous vote. Everyone's on board. And the few who weren't quit the crew." He shrugged. "Wasn't much of a loss."

Tom shut the door and sat by Chris. He took his hand and traced his fingers over the rough skin, the callouses and veins, the scars. He loved his hands, how big they were, how gentle they could be. His arms, with their great round muscles, the dark outline of his tattoos, skull sockets staring blindly at him in the gloom.

Isabel came in late that night and gave Tom some soup and a sandwich. She sat with him beside Chris, both touching his arm, whispering that he would be just fine.

"He did it for me. Mick was coming at me. Said he smelled my..." He swallowed and looked down. "My period blood. Chris went crazy. Shanked him like they learn in prison." Holding Chris's hand, he stared down at him. "He almost died."

She caressed Tom's cheek.

"You're brave and full of heart, love. You're worth fighting for, and protecting," she said fiercely. "He did it because you're his everything. And you mean the world to us."

"Mom," Tom breathed, and leaned into her embrace.

Chris woke around dawn, a groan of pain bubbling up from his chest. Tom was there to hold him, patting down the sweat on his face, murmuring to him sweetly. Jake came in to change his bandage, but Chris refused another pain pill.

The next day, he was able to mount his bike and with hard, careful hugs and firm handshakes, he thanked Jake for letting him stay and rest, and for backing him up.

“We all heard what he said about the boy, Chris,” Jake said. “We all heard what he did. He was playing the crew wrong, and that’s the worst a boss could do.”

Back at their house, Chris left the bike exposed in the back, bending double to lift his leg over the seat. Tom helped him, sensing that Chris’s body wasn’t only in pain from the gun shot, but from the fight itself. His cheek was purpling, and dark bruises were forming on his chest and stomach. There was even one long bruise over his shoulder, and Tom had no idea what had caused it.

They limped down the hall and to the bedroom. Chris fell against the pillows with a sigh, eyes closing immediately. Tom undressed him as best he could, pulling off his boots and jeans, and pulling the blankets up to his chin.

Tom cleaned up the kitchen, finishing the cookies from the day before. The ones he’d left on the counter were hard as rocks, so he broke them into crumbs and left some on the window ledge for the birds to eat. The rest he tossed in the garbage. The new cookies he placed in an air-tight container so they would stay soft for when Chris woke up.

Chris slept all day. Tom brought his laptop and books into the room with him, closing the door and turning on the heater. He watched more videos online, wrote comments on what did and didn’t work for him on a community-based cooking site. He read for a bit, reclining against Chris’s back, eventually dozing off, book open on his face.

Monday morning, he dressed for school and kissed Chris awake.

Chris stirred and rubbed his eyes, and then flinched when his brow smarted.

“I’m going to school, Daddy,” Tom whispered, pecking at his nose.

Chris started to rise. “I’ll take you.”

“No,” Tom said firmly, and Chris froze. “Daddy, you need to rest. I can take my bike. I’ll come straight here after school.”

“Are you sure?”

Tom smiled. “Positive. I need you better. Please get better?”

“Yes, baby. I will.”

Over the next two weeks, Chris rested, staying in bed or limping out to the living room to lie on the sofa. Tom cooked his meals and made him warm treats. At night, they slept spooned together, Chris often waking to Tom sucking on his cock, grinning wide at him as he licked at the head with his strawberry tongue. Or like he loved to do, Tom would already be riding him when Chris woke on the verge of orgasm, spilling into him with a choked and drowsy groan, Tom’s giggles following him into sleep again. His rut hit during Tom’s winter break. Still sore and in pain, Chris’s usual vigor was dampened. Tom took the lead and rode him until they both collapsed with exhaustion, Chris knotted hard and pulsed inside him; or he would sink into Tom lying on their sides, his long pale leg hooked up over his elbow. The bullet wound stung, but he bit through it, growling into Tom’s neck, marking him up good.

And still they marked their calendars, still they counted the days, still they looked ahead for when they would cycle together, and wonder how they would manage.

Most of December and January was spent in a subdued kind of quiet. Chris returned to work, both as mechanic and as boss of his crew. His wound healed cleanly, but closed raggedly, cutting deep into his tattoo. Tom touched it every night, realizing how close he'd been to losing him, thinking of the awful heartbreak Isabel had to have endured at the death of her mate, and loved her all the more for her strength.

He spent Christmas partially at his mother's house, making a quick appearance for appearance's sake. She seemed to understand, without any formal explanation, that he was living somewhere else now, his room an empty relic of his long ago presence there. It was a simple and unmentioned fact between them that they didn't bring up.

Jeff ignored him. His jaw and arm had healed and he was traveling the state again, but when Tom was over he left the room. But Tom didn't visit often, so it wasn't an issue.

The morning of his seventeenth birthday in February, all freezing winds and bitter rains, Chris rolled over in bed and palmed Tom's neck.

"Move in with me," he said quietly.

Tom giggled. "I already have."

"Officially."

Tom stared at him and kissed his wrist. "Okay, Daddy."

"You'll be mine."

"Like your wife?" Tom said, smiling wide. He scooted closer, his leg squeezing between Chris's thighs, brushing his cock.

"Mmm," Chris breathed, wrapping his arms around Tom's back. "I like the sound of that. My little boy wife."

"All in one," he said softly, eyes rolling back as Chris licked behind his ear.

"I love you," Chris whispered.

"I love you, too, Daddy." They squeezed each other tightly, their centers aligning, second nature.

There would be a bonfire at Jake's for Tom's birthday, with a cookout and a big cake and plenty of beer.

"You're having a drink tonight. Or two or three," Chris said into Tom's ear. "You get extra bendy when you're tipsy."

Tom laughed and vowed he would, as long as Chris kissed him at midnight.

"I'm going to kiss you every hour," he promised.

The crew met up at Chris's house just before sundown, and when it was time to go Tom climbed on behind Chris. He took a drag from Chris's cigarette, and then crushed it under his boot. Putting his helmet on, he hugged Chris from behind.

"Ready, baby?"

"Yes!" he said, laughing.

Chris waved a hand in the air and revved his engine. Forty bikes revved theirs in answer. Tom squeezed Chris tightly as they pulled out onto the road and headed deep into the desert, where later that night a raging fire and birthday kisses would welcome him into a new year.

To Suddenly Be Without

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

It was June again and the desert was a scorched wasteland of spindly cacti and cragged-limbed half-trees. The moon was full, a bright circle of white in the sky, and Tom stared up at it with worry in his gut. Somewhere in the brush a coyote howled and another responded farther in the distance. He and Chris were lying out on the hood of Chris's Camaro looking for falling stars, the desert's cool night winds brushing over them.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I've double checked everything. The days are synced next week."

Chris tightened his hold on Tom. "I'd go crazy with happiness seeing you big with my baby, but not yet, Tom. You're not even eighteen."

"I want babies with you, too, Chris. But what can we do?"

Chris took a drag of his cigarette, the end fluttering red in the dark.

"I have an idea." He blew the smoke to the side and looked down at Tom. "But it's going to be fucking awful."

Tom leaned up on his elbow and took the cigarette from Chris. He sucked a quick drag and let the smoke funnel out through his nose. He kissed Chris's cheek. "What is it?"

**

Later that night, sitting against the headboard, Tom still had that flat, stunned look that had seeped into his features since Chris had told him of his plan.

"I'll talk to Román about this. And Jake. See if they'll help me," Chris said, brushing his teeth and coming to bed beside him. He took Tom's hand. "I know they will."

"But Daddy. How will we...survive it? I can't even imagine it." His eyes fell shut.

Chris smiled sadly. "It'll feel like dying. Definitely. But we won't. And we'll be okay at the end of it. I promise."

Tom stared at him a moment longer and then curled into his arms, pushing his face into Chris's armpit, his comfort zone.

"Should I call them up? Ask for their help?"

Tom sighed and trailed his nose along coarse blond hairs. "Yes, Daddy. You should."

Chris called up Román and Jake the next morning, asked them over for a cookout. Isabel prepared the meat, seasoning it and cutting off the bits of fat, while Tom buttered the onions, wrapping them

in foil and carrying them out for Chris to grill. He shared a beer with him as Chris flipped the steaks and chatted with Jake and Román, who'd brought along his twin brother, Adán. Tortillas warmed, meat diced, salsa drizzled and beer bottles clinked, they ate in a circle of lawn chairs out in the shade by the garage.

"So what's going on, Hems?" Román asked. He clasped an iced beer bottle between his hands.

"Can't we just get together for some drinks and great food?" Isabel winked at Tom and took a drink of her beer.

"Of course we can," Chris said, laughing. But he sobered and took Tom's hand.

"What? You're getting married!"

Tom kicked Jake's shin lightly, and the others erupted in laughter.

"If I could I would," Chris said quietly, wrapping Tom under his arm. "But we actually wanted to ask you all a serious question. You're the ones we trust the most. The ones we would like to trust with a secret we've been keeping."

Isabel's eyes darted to Tom, a question curving her brow. Tom smiled and nodded.

"I get my rut next week, and Tom gets his heat. Same day. We wanted to ask if you would help keep us separated during the two days we'd be under."

Román shrugged his shoulders. "For what, though?"

"I'm a Dual," Tom said, and felt four sets of eyes flick his way. Isabel smiled.

"A Dual?" Jake said.

"Like...a Dual *Dual*?"

"Yes. And that's why I need to be separated from Chris."

"You don't want to be pregnant," Isabel whispered. "Just yet."

"Just yet," Tom echoed, reaching for her hand.

"I remember what Mick had said. Back at the bonfire," Jake said slowly. And then his eyes widened and he glanced up at Tom, silenced by his sudden realization.

Tom blushed and tipped his beer bottle toward him.

"Thing is, I would need to be restrained," Chris said. "Chained would be best."

"Now, wait a minute," Román cut in. He lifted his arms, face open with surprise. "You want us to keep your boy—." He paused, and bent his head at Tom. "Boy?"

Tom laughed quietly. "I answer to male pronouns. Yes."

"Cool," Román said. "So you want us to keep your boy away from you. And who does that while we're watching you?"

"I will," Isabel cut in. "Me and a couple of the girls. Ana Maria and Gisele, I think. They are closest with you, no?"

Tom nodded.

“You keep Chris occupied and I’ll keep Tom safe.” Isabel shrugged, no big deal.

“Two days,” Chris said. “I don’t expect you to watch me for forty-eight hours straight. Maybe cover it in shifts. But once I’m tied down good enough, I won’t be going anywhere. No matter what I threaten, no matter what I try to do to get out.” He looked them all in turn. “And I will threaten. I’ll say some nasty stuff probably. Because I’ll have only one thing on my mind, and you would all be in my way.”

They laughed quietly, a little unnerved, but relieved.

“So will you help us?”

Adán was the quiet brother, hardly ever spoke a word, but he looked up at them now and said, “Yes.” Román nodded, agreeing. “But do you know how often you’ll need us to do this? How often do your cycles link up?”

Tom leaned forward. “I’ve been keeping schedule of when we get our heats and ruts. It doesn’t happen very often. I’m guessing, from what I’ve recorded so far, every year and a half, maybe two years.”

“And you want to continue this until you’re ready for a family?”

“Until Tom’s older, yeah.” Chris lifted his brows. “So?”

The others looked around at each other, and then over at them.

“Absolutely.”

“Of course.”

“Yes.”

Chris squeezed Tom close, grinning down at him. “Then, we should prepare.”

**

It began with making a visit to the hardware store. Chris bought heavy duty chains and zip ties. And a strawberry lollipop for Tom. Jake began cleaning out his basement, deciding it was the best place to keep Chris during his rut. Isabel would take Tom to her house on the other side of town. It was near the edge of the industrial part of the city, littered with factories and unused railroad tracks, mainly why she liked spending so much time with Jake in the deep desert. But her house was one of the few remaining from the 1930’s, an old place with strong foundations and a cool interior. It was two storeys and surrounded by a tall green trees and a black wrought iron fence. It had high windows, a pointed roof and a front balcony.

No one was coming close without her knowing about it.

Román would stay with Jake and Chris in the basement, figuring two men guarding Chris was better than one. Adán would supply water and food from their restaurant, moving between the two locations to make sure everyone was fed and hydrated.

Tom couldn’t believe how fast the plan had come together, how willing their friends were to help them. It warmed his heart to feel such a rush of affection for them, and from them. They cared

about his and Chris's wellbeing, wanted them to remain safe and healthy and happy. It was more than he would ever have expected from a person back when he was still alone in the world.

The day before their cycles started, Tom baked batch after batch of cookies. Chocolate chip, strawberry cheesecake, ginger molasses. Sealing them into plastic containers, he stacked them on the table.

"For our friends," he whispered, holding a hand to his navel, beginning to pale around his ears. Chris, who had been hovering over him all day, took a deep inhale before cursing and leaving the room, feeling as if he were leaving behind what gave him his very life.

Tom blinked dazedly as Chris stormed out. He hadn't been feeling well most of the morning, his stomach cramping, his skin flushing with heat. Chris wasn't any better, pacing the living room, his eyes beginning to bruise, flexing his hands and rushing into the kitchen every few minutes to make sure Tom was still there, still safe and his.

Day turned to night, and they could only stare at each other across the counter space, both feeling with innate sharpness every twinge that happened in the other. It gutted them all the more, made their hearts seize, these joined and duplicated experiences, their own and their mate's.

Finally, unable to bear it any longer, Tom stumbled forward with a muted mumble and collapsed against Chris, kissing his neck with sweet, small noises, his hand curling in his hair.

"Babe," Chris breathed, face pained, falling back against the wall as Tom scurried closer. He fished out his cell phone, dialing a number.

"Daddy," Tom whispered, trying to climb off the floor and into his arms. "Oh, Daddy, please."

Jake answered.

"It's time. Bring Isabel. She needs to take Tom."

"No," Tom moaned, scrambling to get closer.

Chris hung up. "We have to, Tom. We have to." But he wrapped him in his arms all the same, collapsing him against the counter and mouthing at his neck. That's where Jake, Román, and Isabel found them, making out against the pantry wall, Tom's lips already swollen, his eyes already hazy. Chris cut a sharp, distressed look at them over his shoulder and Isabel jumped forward.

"Alright, my darling. You're coming with me tonight. The girls are all ready for us back at the house. Movies and champagne and candy—."

"Daddy," Tom moaned, refusing to budge from Chris. His arms were snaked around his neck, chin jutting upward for more kisses. "Chris...please."

"Fuck," Chris groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. Jake started forward to help but Chris snatched Tom against him and guarded him from view, lip curling up in a snarl. A warning.

"Enough of that, Chris," Isabel cut in, waving Jake back cautiously. "Now you hand that boy over and this will all be over soon."

With Tom mewling and tangled around him, Chris nodded. Defeated and trembling, he staggered back and tried peeling Tom off himself, but it was like he hadn't the strength to deny his boy, who was insistent on more kisses and getting rid of Chris's shirt.

“Go...with Isabel, Tom. You have to go with her.”

“I don’t want mom. I want you.”

Isabel laughed and circled her arms around his thin waist.

“Sweet angel, come with me. It’s alright.”

But it was no use. Tom was a determined pup clinging to his alpha. Chris had to resort to a desperate measure. Grabbing Tom up against him, he spun him quickly and bent low over his neck, biting down. Tom went limp in his arms, a strangled moan caught in his chest. Keeping his teeth locked for several moments longer, to make the gentling a strong one, Chris finally pulled back and hitched Tom up in his arms. Tom’s eyes were glazed, his lips parted in astonished ecstasy. Against Chris’s chest, his pale hands fluttered.

“Truck’s just outside,” Isabel said, tugging on his elbow. Eyes glued on Tom, Chris followed her out, Jake and Román keeping a safe distance. Tom’s long limbs flopped as he hurried to the truck, laying him on the front seat, securing his safety belt.

“Chris,” Tom whispered, over and over, so sweetly tempting that Chris nearly lost his composure. Leaning in through the doorway, he took Tom’s head in both hands and kissed him hard, a gutted sob lodged in his throat. Tom was so warm, so smooth, and he smelled like a blooming flower.

“Okay, Chris,” Isabel said gently. She pulled him back by the tail of his shirt. “I’ll bring him back. I promise.”

Eyes on his mate, Chris hobbled backward, feet unsteady in the dirt. Isabel moved fast, shutting the door and running around to the driver’s side. She turned the engine, a sturdy roar in the night. Tom’s face was a small, perfect moon in the window, his long fingers climbing up the glass, palm spread wide in pleading.

“Tom,” Chris gasped, starting forward, but Jake and Román grabbed hold of each arm, and this time Chris let them. He knew, in the small bit of reason he had left, that Tom needed to go. If only for a little while. Isabel drove down the dirt drive and pulled out onto the paved road, her taillights disappearing in the dark.

Something in Chris snapped, a frayed thread torn in two. He shoved the other two away and spun fast, fisting his hand and punching the closest thing to him: the chained doors of his garage.

“Fuck!”

They rattled under the blow, the wood creaking, the chains clanking loudly. And he paced, knuckles split, blood dripping down his fingers.

“Come with us, Chris. We’ll get you right.” His friends gestured with their hands and he found himself letting them lead him. They secured the house and then piled him into Román’s car, heading east toward Jake’s house. Chris hesitated before walking in, looking up at the moon already beginning to wane from its former fullness. He remembered when he and Tom had laid out on the hood of his Camaro only last week, watching for falling stars.

Glancing out over the desert where he knew the city lay far from his sight, he whispered Tom’s name and hoped that he heard him, felt him, wherever he was. Román finally took his elbow and guided him inside, down the hall and to the door that led down to the basement, which was wide and had a low ceiling. His head barely grazed the wooden planks above him. With the fight seeped out of him for the moment, despairing at his separation from Tom, Chris was docile as his friends

chained him to the floor. Two metal loops had been drilled into the wall behind him, two more into the floor. The chains would circle from one pair and through the other, Chris's wrists and ankles wrapped in the metal between them. If he tugged with his arms, the chain would pull around his ankles. It would keep him trapped in a small area of the basement, of no harm to anyone or himself.

He could stand, kneel, and even lie down, but his strength failed him that moment. Kneeling, he stared down at the dusty cement floor, a gnawing red worm starting to squirm in his gut. He needed his mate. His mate needed him. But they were doing the right thing. He knew they were.

Blinking, he took in his jeans and plain T-shirt. What had Tom been wearing? Would he be cold?

He shook his head to clear it, his mind was already beginning to edge with gray.

"We'll give you water and food, Chris. But we won't let you out of your chains. Not for two days. Isa and I will be keeping in contact, so we'll all know the statuses of the others. We're here to help."

Chris nodded, head hanging. "Thank you," he whispered, and Román chuckled.

"I figure that's the last nice thing we'll hear him say for a while."

**

Tom felt a pang of pain in his chest and he turned toward the east, misty eyes flicking left and right. His heart started a panicked beat.

"Daddy."

Keeping her long wiry arms around him, Isabel whispered for him to keep moving. They staggered up the front steps, Tom's legs feeling leaden. Gisele and Ana Maria were already inside. They'd lit candles and tacked flower petal sheets to the windows. They were at his side instantly, taking his hands and petting his hair. He was led into a room on the second floor and shown to the bed. It was piled with clean sheets, soft and smelling of fresh laundry detergent. He toppled onto the mattress, half-conscious as the girls removed his boots and jeans. He'd worn boxer briefs and a simple undershirt, already so stifled from the lingering heat of the day and the fire building in his stomach.

He needed to be filled. He needed seed.

"Chris," he moaned, hands curling in the sheets, head twisting on the pillow.

"Shh, it's alright," Isabel whispered, sitting beside him and cupping his cheek. "Your Daddy is fine. He's being taken care of."

"He's not. I can feel it. He needs me. I feel his heart in my stomach. It's pulsing."

"Grab the ice packs," she said over her shoulder and one of the girls hurried away. When she returned, they all climbed into the bed with him, running ice cubes over his limbs and neck, around the bow of his lips. Ice packs were pressed to his neck, champagne dripped into his mouth, long fingered hands slipped into his own. They murmured to him, quiet whispers that sent his head spinning, pleading for Chris, spine arching.

"Sleep now, Tom," Ana Maria said. "It'll all be like a dream. A blur."

He shook his head, mouth dry again, lips swollen.

“We won’t let anything happen to you. Sleep now.”

“Sleep.”

“Shh. It’s alright.”

Tom moaned faintly, his eyes beginning to drift closed. Sleep would take him that night, but the morning would be different. He felt it like a claw of pain in his belly, a cramping that had him curling into himself, weeping quietly.

Their bond was a demanding, spoiled thing, inflating with fury in his blood. It called for Chris, incessant and imperious, necessitating as only something royal and holy ever could. It would only cease painning him until what it demanded was at his side once more.

And he was, sadly, without his alpha mate.

**

After a year of mating with Tom during each of their cycles, of having complete access to him when they needed each other most and then to suddenly be *without*, was like an ice pick grinding into his gut.

Chris paced on the concrete, the chains confining him to a space no bigger than a few feet round. Jake sat at the base of the stairs, watching him.

“Just take it easy, Chris.”

“I can feel him. He’s in pain.”

“And so are you.”

Chris shook his head, jaw gritted. *Didn’t matter.*

“Drink some water.” A bottle was rolled his way and Chris snatched it up. He guzzled the cold liquid down and then crushed the plastic in his hands, violence beginning to manifest itself through his need to mate.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.” He stopped, snapping his head around. “But Tom likes fruit. He likes fruit when he’s like this. Tell Isabel. Tell her.”

“I have, Chris. We have everything set to go. You don’t have to worry.”

Jake studied his friend. His hands clenching and unclenching, the deep bruises under his eyes, the slightly bowed curve of his spine, like an animal in a cage. His boots rasped in the sand littered over the concrete, no doubt ready to pace a hole straight through to the ground beneath the house.

“You should sleep, Chris.”

“No,” Chris grunted, facing the west wall of the basement. He stayed like that for a long time, shoulders held tense, immovable.

“How’s he doing?” Román asked when Jake stepped back into the upper floor landing.

Jake closed the door to the basement and shrugged. “He’s getting antsy. And he might start to get

physical.”

“Like...you know?”

Jake laughed. “Probably that too. But I meant violent. If he doesn’t get what he wants.”

Román shook his head. “Shit. I wonder how Tom’s doing.”

“Don’t know. Chris said he was in pain. That he could feel it.”

**

Dawn brought with it broken moans and slick sweat. Tom tossed and turned, the sheets damp beneath him. Ana Maria and Gisele stood by the bed, fanning him with magazines, ice packs tucked against his slim body. Isabel cut fruit and took it upstairs in a bowl, persuading Tom into eating one small piece at a time, assuring him in gentle words that Chris was alright, that they would be together soon.

“But I need him,” he breathed, hips rolling. “I need him, please. The fire. The fire hurts.”

“I wish there was something we could do,” Gisele whispered, dabbing at Tom’s forehead with a cool cloth.

“Short of buckling on a strap-on, there’s not much we can do.”

Gisele shrugged. “I mean, I’ve never said no to new things.”

Isabel tossed her a grape, laughing. “No. He’ll know it’s not Chris. He’ll have to ride this out on his own. We’re here to help him, make sure he doesn’t hurt himself, and that he’s safe.”

She glanced toward the balcony, shuttered tight against the midday sun. Tom had eaten only half the fruit, but he would need to stay hydrated.

“Give him water. And keep him cool with ice. I’ll go switch out the packs in the freezer.” She walked slowly toward the balcony doors, ear cocked.

“What is it?”

Isabel’s eyes narrowed. “Bring me the guns.”

**

There was shifting in the basement, and pained growls. Román descended slowly, a little more of Chris coming into view through the slanted bars of the staircase.

He was kneeling on the floor, wrists hanging limp up by his head. But every muscle was held taut with anger, teeth exposed in a snarl. He was yanking at his chains, clawing the air, knees sliding on the concrete as he struggled to rise and escape.

Electric blue eyes snapped up at Román, and his growl deepened.

“Get these off me.” Voice low, brows bent, he looked every bit like a wild panther, and Román’s instinct to run crept over his mind.

“Can’t do that, Hems,” he said easily, taking a seat on the last step.

Chris's eyes fluttered closed, and he twisted his neck to sniff at his own shoulder. "Oh, I can smell him. He was here. On me. He was on me. Bring him to me. Get these fucking chains off and I'll find him myself!"

"No."

"Goddamn you, Rome!" He lunged forward but was hauled back by the chains, sliding in the sand, knees torn. He hung his head. "Fuck you."

"Eat something. Here."

He slung a plate of meat across the floor, hating how degrading it felt for Chris. To be fed like a chained dog. Chris turned from the food, hands shaking.

"I want Tom."

"And you'll have him day after tomorrow."

"No," he moaned, boots sliding as he tried to gain his footing. Streaks of blood lined the floor. "Bring him to me now or I swear to God I'll strap you to one of my bikes and set it on fire."

Román chuckled. "Why you gotta burn me, though? Why can't you run me over? Make it quick?"

Chris let out a pain groan, chains clinking as he shifted. "You piece of shit."

"I love you, too, Hems. We'll be down to check on you in a bit."

He left Chris in the dim dark. Flexing his wrists, Chris threw his weight against the chains, neck straining as he tried to snap the steel. But it was no use and he collapsed back against the floor, breathing ragged. His erection was a painful rod in his jeans, hips jutting toward the west wall.

"Babe."

"Tom, please."

"Please...fuck."

He sagged against his restraints, tears burning down his cheeks, dripping to the floor.

A flash of Tom's face smiling up at him from their bed back home, and Chris came hard.

He screamed into the room, shuddering through the half pain, half pleasure, unable to knot. He needed Tom's warm cunt, couldn't find it. Landing on his face, Chris lay against the concrete, breaths gusting sand into the air. His hips moved on their own, humping, seeking. Fingers clawed, wrists bruised, he wept brokenly, cock hard again and surging for the right heat.

And as orgasm after orgasm battered his will with no relief and no knotting, Chris cried out for his mate, his screams gutted, sand cutting into his face. He tugged and crawled to the west, dragged back to his prison corner by chains that snapped and cut into him, calling for him. Again and again.

**

Tom gasped, eyes flying open.

"Daddy!"

“Hey, now,” someone said gently, a girl’s voice. “It’s okay.”

There were hands on his face. Too small, too soft. There was no engine grease, no smell of motor fuel and garden flowers. Grimacing, he tore his face away, crying for Chris again.

Isabel was at the balcony door, peering between the wooden slants. In her hand she held a shotgun. She frowned at something outside.

“He needs me. Oh, God. It hurts. He needs me.”

There was a clanging from outside and all three women whipped their heads toward the balcony. Tom, writhing on the bed, stuck a hand into his briefs and started fingering himself. He moaned at the fullness, not even close enough.

“Go on, sweetheart,” Isabel whispered, parting the blinds carefully. “Make yourself feel better.”

Ana Maria and Gisele joined her at the window, picking up shotguns of their own. They checked the barrels and nodded to each other. Making sure Tom was occupied on the bed, Isabel threw open the balcony doors and stepped outside, shotgun raised. Ana Maria and Gisele flanked her.

“Stop right there!” she called down to the three men hovering outside the wrought iron fence. One had a foot on the ledge, ready to start the climb over.

“Smelled him from the road,” one said gruffly. He shook the gates. “Let us up.”

Isabel cocked her weapon. “This omega is claimed. Get lost. I’ll shoot you, no problem.”

Tom moaned from in the room, his hand working hard between his legs, and the men snapped their heads up, growling at the women.

One started to hoist himself onto the iron bars, his long arms reaching the top edge when Isabel fired. The shot exploded over their heads and the men scattered back a few steps, eyes wide. The empty casing spiraled over the edge of the balcony and landed on the broken slabs of tile below.

“That was a warning. You cross onto my property, I’ll shoot a kneecap each. Which parts do you want, girls?”

“Heart,” said Gisele.

“Dicks!” yelled Ana Maria. They cocked their weapons and the men finally hurried off.

“One of you stay out here. There’ll be more.” Gisele took the first post. Isabel and Ana Maria hurried inside. They replaced the lukewarm compresses on Tom’s body with ice cold ones, but even so his body radiated heat, skin flushed pink.

“He’s very beautiful,” Ana said, petting his damp curls.

“That he is. A Dual. I couldn’t believe it when he told me.”

“It’s no wonder that Chris adores him. He’s like a fairy.”

Tom turned into her touch, lips parting, seeking. She sat with him and fanned his face while Isabel raced downstairs for more ice. She needed to update Jake about the men outside, wondering how the boys were faring with Chris.

**

“Let me out!”

"Take these fucking chains off!"

“I will kill you both. Tear through these walls. Find him. I will find him. You sons of bitches. Hiding him from me.”

“Where’s my boy? I need princess. Please. Bring her to me. Give her a lollipop. He loves those.”

“Please. I’m begging you.”

“Please.”

“Tom.”

Hanging limp in his twisted nest of chains, cock erupting again and again in his jeans, Chris gasped shallowly down at the floor. Hair frayed and matted with sweat, wrists bruised, knees bleeding, ankles tied with zip wire, Chris slowly spent every ounce of his strength to the force of his desire: to fuck Tom, to escape his restraints, to satisfy his thirst and hunger. Now that he was weakened, Jake approached with water, soaking the back of Chris’s neck and rubbing his scalp with a friendly hand.

Shivering, he butted his head into Jake’s palm, any form of touch driving him to tears.

“It’s almost over now, Chris. Just tonight. And then you’ll be with Tom again.”

“Tom,” he murmured, his addled brain picking up on only the one word.

“Have some water.” Jake tilted Chris’s chin up and angled the water bottle to the corner of his mouth. Chris drank sluggishly, deeply enough to prove his great thirst.

He called Isabel as soon as he was upstairs again, and she told him about the men prowling outside.

“Half a dozen so far. We’re keeping an eye on them. One of the girls, or myself, is always standing guard.”

“Good. Be careful.”

“How’s Chris?”

“Losing the fight.”

“Tom’s in the same boat. He’s eaten only a handful of fruit. And we give him as much water as he’ll let us. But he’s lying on that bed like his life has drained out of him. Only whispers for Chris.”

“It’ll be over for them soon.”

On the third day, the girls prepared a bath for Tom and stripped him of his soiled underclothes. They rinsed his hair and soaped up his shoulders and neck, letting the water wash from his limbs the sticky residue of his frustrated arousal. In and out of consciousness, Tom murmured for Chris, and then finally for food, which made Isabel sigh in relief. Surely, the worst was over. Gisele made some soup and spooned it into Tom’s mouth, telling him a story about the trouble her pet monkey, Oyster, was probably getting into all alone at home. Tom giggled quietly, accepting each spoonful, his temperature slowly returning to normal. Isabel lent him a pale blue summer dress dotted with

red roses, and he slipped into it, grateful for the airy material. His skin was so sensitive.

Across the city, Jake and Román unlocked the chains from Chris's wrists and cut the zip ties around his ankles. Unwinding the chains link by link, he was left shaking with fatigue and hunger on the floor of the basement, whispering nonsense about car hoods and pink heart shades and wanting star-crowns. They hosed him down in the shower, tossing his clothes in the wash and lending him a pair of Jake's shorts. Adán had made trips between the two houses, feeding everyone with food from the restaurant. His brother prepared Chris two steak burritos and gave him a beer. Chris devoured everything before finally lying back on the bed in the spare room.

"Is he okay?" he asked, eyes distant on the wall.

"He's okay. The girls are bringing him back now. He'll be here any minute."

Chris let his eyes drift closed, a tear spilling thickly and disappearing into his shorn hair.

When Tom arrived, Chris was asleep. Drowsy and not fully present, Tom was helped into the house by the girls, who walked him down the hallway to the room where Chris was dozing. The others hung back as Tom staggered in on his own, gravitating toward the bed with lashes half lowered. Lifting a knee, he climbed in beside Chris, curling into his side, nosing his way into Chris's armpit.

Their friends watched them sleep for a while, all smiling in a small sort of way, happy that they were reunited again. The ordeal had been difficult for everyone around, but it had been borderline traumatic for Chris and Tom. Stunned into mute silence, they'd barely managed to function on their own in the hours after waking from their horrifying cycles, needing help with bathing and eating. And now they slept, bone-weary, next to the very person they'd been calling for for two days.

"Now I need some chow," Román said, pulling the others back and closing the door with a quiet click. Their voices receded into the kitchen, where they cracked open ice cold beers and started on some steak tacos Adán had brought by. They gave the boys the privacy they'd need upon waking, which they did a couple of hours later. In their sleep they had tangled themselves together, finding each other in the half-light.

Jake's house was quiet, but they heard music from outside, soft chatter and the sound of a crackling fire. Chris was the first to stir, tightening his arms around Tom and sniffing at his hair.

Tom groaned faintly, squirming.

"No," Chris whispered. "You're not going anywhere."

Gasping, Tom's eyes fluttered open. "Daddy?" His eyes welled with tears.

"You smell of women," Chris said roughly. "Which is fine. Women are okay. But no men. Ever."

The tears spilled and Tom fell forward, sobbing into Chris's neck. Chris held him hard against his chest, and even though the ache in his gut from their forced separation had begun to wane, he had no intention of letting Tom out of his sight for the next ten years. He licked a path to Tom's throat and sucked at the skin there, desperate to have his scent strong on his mate again.

Still weak, still disoriented a bit, they clung to each other, fast kisses sounding in the room. Hands strayed down Chris's back, soft breaths at his ear. Tom's legs spread and Chris rolled himself between, falling heavy on him, mouths sealed together. They wept, tears dripping off lashes and onto each other's cheeks, spilling between their lips as they dared to breathe and kiss again, and then more. Tom yanked Chris's shorts low and Chris shoved Tom's dress up, bunching the

material around his waist. Cock like a hard pipe, Chris dug his fingers into Tom's thighs, the swollen tip dipping into Tom's lush entrance. And when he pushed in Tom broke from their kiss with a small cry, his nails dragging into the meat of his back.

"I love you," he breathed, opening his eyes to the tears shining there, curled lashes soaked.

"I love you the most." He slammed in and grunted as Tom's tight little cunt swallowed him whole, the blue strap of his dress falling off a thin shoulder and revealing a peek of pink nipple.

This was home, this was firelight and the gaze of stars. This was hot wind on his face and the roar of a motorcycle. A boy giggling in his arms as they tussled on the bed, a long hug in the middle of the night, when they'd found each other in the dark, sinking against a chest they knew whose heart belonged only to them. Their separation had been painful, their bond neglected and furious, but this reunion was as a pulsing ember in the chamber of their hearts.

There was music in the background, and someone singing drunkenly in Spanish, but they smiled and moaned into their kisses.

"I felt my death," Tom said, scratching at Chris's scalp, hooking his legs around his buttocks to make him go harder. Chris complied, their flesh smacking loudly in the room.

"And I did die," Chris said between kisses. "I'm not alive. This isn't real."

"It is. And I am. And you are. Now come in me and fill me with what I needed most without you."

Despite experiencing more than a dozen orgasms in two days, Chris fucked into Tom and came deep inside, biting Tom's neck with a savage groan. Eyes rolling up, Tom's orgasm was a soft drumming of butterfly wings in his blood, growing to a steady pulse, and finally crashing over his senses with a roar. His hearing snuffed out, his sight grew blurry, and all he felt were the flutters of his cunt around Chris's cock.

Chris knotted him hard, swelling at the base and locking him in. But they wouldn't have gone anywhere even if they'd been able. Collapsing onto the pillows, falling into sleep again, they silently vowed never to endure such a torture again.

But in the end, they would have to.

Because while the next year and a half passed without incident, celebrating Tom's eighteenth birthday and his graduation from high school, he was still too young for children. And so they enlisted the help of their friends once again, driving Tom away during a bleakly cold December morning, and chaining Chris to the freezing cement floor of Jake's basement. Another two days of bond-defying separation, sapping their spirits, draining their strength, rolling together in bed finally at the end of it all. Disbelief etched on their saddened faces.

On the porch one evening, Tom stared down at his belly, empty yet. "Will we have to do this every time we don't want to have kids, mom?" he asked, and Isabel wrapped her arm around his shoulder, both staring out at the desert brimming with shade and sunlight.

"As a Dual, your double nature presents complications for deciding on how to plan for a family. But you and Chris have never been like any others. You've always been above the expectations of what our society says is okay for couples. And it makes you all the more special. I think that yes, you'll have to endure the separation. Otherwise you'll be having a baby every two years." Tom laughed, both frightened at the idea, and incredibly excited to get started.

"I think you should enjoy your mate now that you have him to yourself. Soak him in. Learn

everything you can about him. Kids will only amplify a lifetime of happiness I know you two will share."

And so the years passed, and they grew in love and heart and home. It wasn't until Tom was twenty-four and fresh from culinary school that he and Chris decided they should try for a baby. Tom was longer of limb and deeper of laugh, having grown two inches and standing nearly at eye level with Chris. He still painted his toes and wore perfume, saving lollipops in a drawer by their bed. He apprenticed at a bakery owned by a man named Paul Sanchez, who specialized in traditional American and Mexican pastries. Feeling the most secure and capable in their life together, they counted the days and thanked their friends for their help these many years, telling them they could take a break this time round.

Chris sliced some fruit and stocked the fridge in the bedroom with water. He secured all the bolts in the house and let Isabel and Jake know that if they didn't get a call in two days from himself or Tom that they should come looking for them.

It was a blissful, fluid-soaked blur, their first joined cycle together. Tom vaguely recalled feeding each other fruit from plastic containers, Chris trickling water into his mouth and then taking some for himself. Sore and bruised and depleted, they woke days later with headaches and soft skin and sunlight patches over their groins.

Tom's period did not come the next day and Chris quickly jumped on his bike to visit the drugstore. Back in the bathroom, they waited with bated breath for the requisite five minutes to pass. When the pink plus sign appeared Chris grabbed Tom up, both whooping and waving the stick in the air.

"But of course I'm pregnant!" Tom laughed, kissing his mate. "Your seed will take root in me again and again, my knight."

Chris grinned and squeezed Tom's bum, guiding him toward the rumpled bed.

Isabel came over with cake and balloons, already crying as she pushed in through the front door.

"My son is going to be a mother!" she screamed towards the desert before slamming the door and kissing Tom on the forehead.

Elated about meeting her first grandchild, Isabel took charge of everything. She started arranging a baby shower for two months before Tom was due to give birth. She found a midwife who had delivered to Duals before, and she took charge of Tom's diet and Chris's immediate abstinence from smoking. In the months that followed, Tom started rounding out, his flat belly swelling to a gentle curve. It was still unnoticeable to the passing eye, but Chris often lay in bed with him, a hand on his stomach, his lips just above his navel, whispering to their baby to come home to them safe and sound.

It was nice not having heats or Chris not having his ruts for the duration of his pregnancy. He had an entire nine months to spend at his mate's side and not lose entire days to the fogged memories of their cycles. It was true that their bond was strengthened with every cycle they went through, but it was also nice not to have to worry where they might be or who they might be with, or if they would need to prepare for one of the Awful Cycles spent apart to avoid pregnancy to begin with.

Tom met with the midwife who would be attending to him during the birth. Her name was Samantha and she was a woman in her forties with straight black hair she kept wrapped around her head. She offered them the opportunity to learn the gender of the baby, but they both decided against it.

“When they are ready, they’ll tell us what they are,” Tom said, rubbing his belly.

Off his shift at the bakery one afternoon, Tom met with Isabel to help him decide on a cake for the shower. Paul, his boss, adamantly refused to let Tom make it himself, saying that he wanted to gift it to Tom and his alpha for their recent happy news. Tom stuttered his thanks, still not fully expectant of kindness from others, and always grateful when bestowed with it.

They had a handful of cake designs set out when the bell above the door rang. Tom lifted a hand. “Just a minute.”

There was a stretch of silence, and then, “Tom?”

He and Isabel looked up at the woman standing just inside the door.

It was his mother. His biological mother.

Tom paled and slowly stood from the table where he and Isabel had cake books open. He was almost five months along now, and his belly bump wasn’t very pronounced, but his mother’s eyes darted down almost immediately, widening at his extended stomach. Barely concealed surprise – and slight disgust – showed on her face. She looked tired, and much older, worn thin, worn down. But she had a shiny new diamond ring on her left hand, and just over her shoulder he spotted Jeff in the parking lot talking into a cell phone.

His heart rate tripled in panic and he took a small step back.

“What are you doing here?” his mother finally asked, blinking around the shop as if finding it foreign.

Tom swallowed around his sudden alarm. Very quietly, he said, “I work here.”

“Work here? Since when?”

Tom narrowed his eyes slightly. What business was it of hers to ask anything of him? It had been eight years since he’d seen her last. Since he realized she really didn’t care for him or his wellbeing.

He owed her nothing.

Sitting beside him, Isabel glanced between him and his mother.

“Paul will be by in a moment,” Tom said, leaning over the table to collect the cake books. Isabel hurried to help. “He’ll be able to help you with—.”

“Tom, are you *pregnant*?”

She clutched her purse close to her side, as if his fertile womb offended even her suspicions about being robbed in broad daylight.

“Hi,” Isabel said, standing up and holding her hand out. “I’m Isabel. Tom’s mom. Who are you?”

His mother snapped her gaze over to Isabel, incredulous. She took in her tattoos and red lipstick, her long black hair and silver hoop earrings, and scoffed. “Excuse me?”

Isabel’s eyebrows rose to her hairline.

“That can’t be. Because *I’m* his mother.”

“No,” Tom said, a protective flare rising up for Isabel. He met his mother’s eyes. “You’re not my mother. Isabel is. She has been for almost ten years now.”

Isabel blinked fast at the woman, letting her gaze drift down to her toes and back up again. “So. You’re the sack of shit that tried to force Tom to be less than what he was.”

His mother gasped, indignantly affronted.

Tom took Isabel’s hand. “Mom. It’s okay. You don’t have to.”

There was a long moment where they stared at each other and Tom almost felt his resolve begin to break, his old instinct to apologize welling up on his tongue. But then he noticed Jeff outside the window hang up his phone call and start toward the entrance of the bakery. Tom tightened his hand on Isabel’s elbow, his other rising to cover his stomach.

But then he heard the roar of a motorcycle, the windows rattling as it came to park just outside the building. Jeff glanced at it briefly, but then did a double take, his own face paling as he recognized the rider.

Chris hurried off the bike and pushed into the bakery, ignoring Jeff entirely.

“Baby,” he said, closing the distance between them in three long strides. He took his head in both hands. “Are you okay? I felt you panic. What’s wrong?” Hand over Tom’s stomach, he wrapped his arm around his neck and pulled him close.

But Tom’s eyes were locked on his mother, who stood gaping at Chris. At thirty-eight, Chris still looked half a decade younger, his muscles hard and healthy, his skin roughened slightly by the sun, his hair thick and still shorn on the sides. At nearly six and a half feet he towered over everyone, but Tom had never felt more proud of Chris’s domineering presence than at that moment, watching his mother gawk up at the man who had accepted her son for who he was and not what she had tried to force him to be. The man who had so clearly impregnated him, of all things.

“We were just leaving,” Tom said evenly, taking Chris’s hand and Isabel’s elbow. “Like I said, ma’am, Paul will be out shortly to help you with your order. My mom and my husband and I need to be on our way.”

He led them through the shop and out the door, cutting a glare at Jeff as they walked toward Isabel’s car.

“Easy now,” Chris murmured, opening the door for him, feeling the well of emotion that assaulted Tom’s heart that moment. Fighting back tears, Tom nodded and slipped into the passenger seat, putting on his seat belt beside Isabel, who turned the engine. Chris bent in through the open doorway and kissed him softly, his big hand covering the swollen curve of his stomach. “You’re okay, my brave boy. I love you. And I’ll see you at home, princess.”

Tom nodded and swallowed back his gasps. Through the windshield, he saw the woman that used to be his mother come rushing out the bakery door, mouth fallen open in disbelief. Chris closed the door and patted the roof. Isabel backed out carefully and then they were gone.

Squinting into the street, he watched them drive away, sticking a toothpick into his mouth. When he turned back to Jeff and Tom’s mother, he saw them take a tentative step back.

Good, he thought. Be afraid of me.

Approaching his bike, he pointed at Jeff’s jaw. “Has it started clicking yet?”

Jeff's hand rose to his face subconsciously, to his old jaw break. Chris grinned.

"That'll get worse," he said, a quiet promise in his voice. He climbed onto his bike and turned the ignition, letting the engine throb through the pavement so they felt the vibrations between their toes.

"You're both fuckwits," he said, spitting out his toothpick. "But just so you know, he doesn't think of you. He doesn't miss you. And he certainly doesn't need you. He has his new family now. And we take care of our own."

He kicked the bike into gear and tore out of the parking lot, following Isabel's car through the streets and toward home.

Scent of Diamonds

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

Tom's contractions started one September morning when he was out in the garden watering the flowers. Belly ballooned out before him, he often had trouble keeping his balance, beginning to suffer backaches from the added weight. Chris rubbed his feet every night and spread oil on his belly and spine to ease the terrible throbbing. And when they fucked, it was slow and gentle, Tom's entire body feeling disjointed and not his own anymore, even if the planes of pleasure that settled like clouds over him were the most familiar things in the world, at his mate's hands.

Chris was in the garage when Tom felt the first pang. He set the watering can down on the porch and then bent double with a grimace, fire racing around his ribs and down into his pelvis.

Distantly, he heard Chris shout his name from the backyard, no doubt having felt the bubble of pain in Tom's body. He came pounding around the corner, eyes wide as Tom gripped the wooden rail and bit back a scream. Moving fast, he helped Tom inside the house and into the living room, where they'd had the birthing area set up for a couple of weeks now. An inflatable mattress covered in clean sheets and soft pillows lay in the center of the room, and he guided Tom onto the plush surface. Clutching his stomach, Tom shrieked as another contraction gnawed around his belly and settled into the bones of his spine. Chris waited through it, reminding him to breathe, to count the beats of his heart. Once calm again, Tom laid back and started soft circles over his belly, murmuring to the baby, hoping to ease the passage into the world.

Chris rushed for clean water and towels. He dialed Samantha and she promised to be on her way, supplying new scissors, cotton cloths, ointments, and baby blankets. Then he called Isabel and Jake. Tom was able to hear her screams through the phone all the way in the living room, and it made him smile up at the ceiling, somewhat breathlessly. They arrived before Samantha did, but they were only ten minutes down the road. When the midwife arrived, she got everyone situated with a task.

"Isabel, as the mother you will help me with getting the babe into position and coaxing it out. Chris, you are to hold Tom's hand and keep him calm. Jake, you hand me anything I ask and be ready with towels and scissors."

With everyone scrambling into position, Samantha started her work. She rubbed warm oils on Tom's stomach, pushing down on it gently to encourage the baby to move. Chris dabbed at Tom's forehead and fed him ice to chew on, holding his hand and whispering his love. Jake hovered from one side to the other, holding the scissors and towels, completely at a loss but ready to help at a moment's notice. Isabel ducked down between Tom's legs and started massaging his vaginal lips.

"Good, Isabel. That's great." Samantha rotated her hands on his stomach, focusing on his waist when another contraction hit. "Vaginal massage helps with the stretch so that you're less likely to tear."

Tom almost fainted at the mention of tearing, turning his head into Chris's neck.

“But don’t you worry,” Samantha said, winking. “I’ve delivered over a hundred babies and no one’s torn on me yet. You’re not going to be the first.”

Morning turned into afternoon, the light slanting on the walls. Tom moaned and held his stomach, wincing as his insides turned to lava.

“You’re almost ready,” Samantha murmured, measuring his entrance. “I think we can start pushing now. Everyone ready?”

They all whispered yes and leaned in close. Rising up onto his elbows, Tom gripped Chris and Isabel’s hands and gave his first push. A terrible trembling started low in his legs, shuddering up his thighs and stopping his breath. He whimpered and fell back.

“Take a breath, Tom,” Samantha ordered. He dragged in an inhale, tears blurring his sight. “Good. Now push again.”

And he did, over and over, his screams echoing out into the road, deserted, surrounded by brush and fading cactus blooms.

“You’re doing wonderful,” Chris breathed, eyes sharp between Tom’s legs, where Samantha felt around inside him and rubbed his belly. “Give us another. My brave boy.”

Tom sobbed, face flushed with heat, sweat dripping off his chin.

“There now, sweetheart,” Isabel soothed, dabbing his forehead with a cloth. “You want to meet this baby, don’t you? This darling little child you’ve carried with you all this time?”

Eyes red with fatigue rolled to meet hers, and Tom nodded. “Yes, mom. I want to meet my baby.”

“Again,” Samantha said, bent between his thighs. “The head.”

Mustering up his strength, Tom bore down and grunted through another handful of pushes, until he felt the cruel pressure crushing his pelvis bones suddenly ease and he heard his baby’s first wails. They were loud and urgent, angry little cries that had him collapsing back with a broken sob. Samantha examined the baby and looked up with a smile.

“A girl. No Dual parts. Entirely female. That is, until and unless she tells us differently.” She winked at him.

Holding Tom, Chris could only stare at their daughter, jaw dropped open in relief and astonishment. Samantha cleared the gunk out of the little mouth and let the babe cry for a moment longer, everyone’s expressions rapt with wonder at this tiny life. Jake passed Chris the scissors and, rendered mute, Chris cut the umbilical cord with tears shedding into his short beard. After wiping the baby down, Samantha passed Tom his daughter, her slippery little arms and legs curling into a fetal position on his chest. She mewled and shivered, her small eyes still closed, her little face scrunched up against all the bright lights and raucous noise.

“Chris,” Tom breathed and looked up to see Chris sobbing into his hands. “Oh, my darling. It’s alright. You’ll make me cry!” But he already was, his tears flowing freely. Chris wrapped his arms around them both and kissed Tom’s cheek over and over.

“Thank you. Thank you, Tom. You’re a goddess. You’ve brought this baby to us. You’re a goddess.”

Blushing red, Tom rocked their baby and kissed his mate gently. Everyone was in tears, crowding

down over them while Samantha cleaned up between his legs. He was battered. He was beat. But he was bursting with happiness over his little girl, who'd stuck a thumb between her lips and fallen asleep against his neck.

"Her name, Tom," Isabel whispered, wiping her eyes and cupping the baby's head.

"I was thinking Marit," he said quietly, and she smiled.

"Muh-reet. Oh, that's lovely. Like a scent of diamonds on my tongue."

"What do you think, Daddy?" he asked Chris, who was staring at him like Tom was a descendant of stars.

"I think you're a goddess," he whispering sniffing at his hair and kissing his lashes.

Tom giggled. "I read it in a book. And thought it a name for a queen."

"*You're* a queen," Chris whispered and Isabel laughed quietly.

"He's *transcended*," she said quietly to Tom, who laughed again.

He kissed Chris's hand. "My love."

Isabel helped Samantha bathe Marit, while Chris lifted Tom and carried him to their room. Tom had no breasts to produce milk, so they made sure to have a large supply of baby formula. Most of what they needed had been generously provided by their friends at the baby shower, Tom delighting in the amount of tiny leather jackets with fiery skulls sewn in, and the pink and orange frilly lace tutu's he could pair them with. His baby girl would be the bikers' most cherished and spoiled princess.

Samantha prepared a bottle and heated it on the stove. Isabel smoothed down Marit's blond hair, just beginning to curl at her temples. She wasn't able to tell if she would have Tom's curly hair or Chris's straight hair, but guessing was half the fun.

On the verge of passing out, Tom waited for Marit to be returned to him, his sweet angel. She was a perfect, beautiful creation. Chris was at his side, stroking his hair, awestruck of him. It made Tom feel both greatly humbled and quietly fantastic. When Isabel came into the room, Marit was still a naked bundle in her arms.

"Oh, won't she be cold?" Tom asked, holding his arms out.

Samantha walked in with the bottle. "We'll cover you in blankets with her. But skin-to-skin contact is extremely important just after birth. She needs to feel her mama, whom she'll know by scent and texture of skin."

Tom held his baby to his chest, cradling her gently because surely her bones were made of glass and he would break her if he wasn't careful? She suckled at the bottle when he angled it into her mouth, plump lips working fast to gobble up the milk. He and Chris turned to each other and laughed giddily, entranced by her every little sound, the way her tiny hand curled around Tom's finger.

Samantha left after a while, collecting her things and promising to visit him in a few days to check how he was healing. She would report the birth and bring him an original certificate of proof. Tom and Chris thanked her with their hearts in their hands, unable to express their profound gratitude to her.

“I promised you I would deliver her safely, and without tearing,” she said, holding her finger up with a wink. “Congratulations to you both.”

Isabel and Jake cleaned up in the living room and started on a small dinner for everyone. But Tom finally gave in to his fatigue and slept against Chris’s chest, Marit tucked between them. Their years of two had become a tender life of three. This tiny nugget he’d made inside himself, their daughter and their life, would grow and become the best of themselves.

“You’ve slain me, Tom,” Chris whispered, holding his enormous hand a centimeter off his daughter’s fuzzy warm head. “You’ve formed this creature, with the love and magic of your body, and I’m slain. Locked to you both for all time, I couldn’t beg for a better fate.”

“Daddy,” Tom breathed, his sob rising up. “You’re the sun to us both. The iron in our blood. Our hero.”

They rested their foreheads together, noses bumping, lips meeting in that age-old way of lovers. And Marit, nestled between their breasts, blinked her eyes open and hummed as honey-sweet milk poured between her lips, her eyes electric blue.

Epilogue: Little Marit

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the tags. Please heed them.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Frilly lace and gemstone tiaras, buckle shoes the color of canaries, tiny black leather jackets and rainbow hair ties, tiny mod boots and skull scarves for the wind, Little Marit, as everyone has begun to call her, is the spitting image of her Papa. With hair the color of suns and wheat stocks, and eyes of the sharpest blue ocean, Little Marit is a darling princess of leather and diamond studs. At five years old, she has her mama's quiet bearing, silently scrutinizing everyone she meets before deciding whether she likes them or not. But once she does, she is a giggly bundle who races your way and jumps into your arms, murmuring sweetly into your hair as she pats your cheeks with affection.

She squeals during motorcycle rides and sings softly in the bath, her long wavy hair a curtain of gold floating in the water. Her helmet is a tiny pink orb against the burnished brown of the surrounding desert; her little stockinged feet two pale petals sprinting in the sand toward her papa in his garage, screeching happily at his booming laughter, legs wiggling in the air as he spins her round and round.

Mama catches up only a minute later, carrying fresh cookies and a pinch for Papa's bum. Little Marit never questions when Nana comes to collect her for their favorite glitter party sleepovers at her house across the city. Or why Mama and Papa look so tired when she's brought back to them two days later. But they are happy and smiling and ready with pancakes and runny eggs. Her favorite.

Papa the Panther and Mama the Gentle.

Her loves and her skies, with thunder roars of motor fumes and desert cactus blossoms, and the distant howling Arizona moon.

End.

Chapter End Notes

[This](#) is how I saw Little Marit as a five-year-old. And [this](#) and [this](#) is how I see her falling into a fashion sense when she's older.

Well, that's it! Thank you for reading!

xoxo

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